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*THE SON
OF PORTHOS*

by

ALEXANDRE DUMAS

Introduction by

MARK WHITE

2437

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Dear Shuby!
Your's
oblique and loverious
Et. Et Grand-father

ALEXANDRE DUMAS

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THE SON OF PORTHOS

ALEXANDRE DUMAS

was born at Villers-Cotterets on July 24th, 1802. His youth was idle and irregular and in 1823 he obtained a clerkship in Paris, but soon turned his attention to Literature and the Drama. A prodigious worker, he had, too, many collaborators, but Dumas himself was the supreme craftsman, perhaps indeed the world's greatest master of the art of narrative. His output has no parallel in French Literature—Historical Novels, Romances, Plays, etc., poured from his pen. He died at Dieppe on the 5th December, 1870. This volume, while complete in itself, is sixth in a series of *D'Artagnan Romances*, the sequence of which is:—

- No. 62. *The Three Musketeers*
- „ 123. *Twenty Years After*
- „ 173. *The Vicomte*
 de Bragelonne
- „ 178. *Louise de la Valliere*
- „ 185. *Man in the Iron Mask*
- „ 339. *Son of Porthos*

INTRODUCTION

"TIMES have altered," reflected Aramis with a broken laugh, "the great conspiracies in which a plotter risked his head on the block of Chalais, Cinq-Mars and Montmorency, have given place to domestic intrigues where the disgrace of a favourite or the ruin of a courtier is arranged behind my lady's fan or the minister's fire-screen. And this hand, which has been mighty enough to shake a throne, is reduced to push court puppets to and fro as though they were pawns on the chessboard."

Yet after all, Aramis, perhaps, was better suited—at least than any of his immortal comrades, for the diplomacies of the boudoir and the piping times of peace. Towards him alone there is a certain coldness or doubt, unlike the glorious delight we yield, without thought or question, to "D'Artagnan's valiant uprightness, the lofty gentlemanliness of Athos, the simple honesty of Porthos."

In tales of ardent romance and violent adventure, we are—no doubt—a little tempted to think better of muscle than brain; we are more intrigued by a mighty arm than a subtle intellect. But there is more in it than this. For Aramis, the ultimate loyalty was not to honour, but to the church. He did not lie, boldly and swiftly, for his friends, but on the deliberately planned Jesuitical plea, that the end always justifies the means, however low it may be necessary to stoop, whatever injury may be done to the innocent and the upright.

"I must beg your pardon," said Aurore to the old courtier, with bitter pride, "for not being on the level

of the task which you deemed me worthy to accomplish.

"I do not care to hurt your feelings. I am fully persuaded that you did not believe you were insulting me. This is credible enough, for the world in which you dwell and which I entered yesterday, regards as glory what I call a shame. How could things be otherwise, when I am a Puritan with odd ideas about honour. I should mar your court with my foolish prejudices, humiliate it with my foolish pride; slight it in my ridiculous innocence. Farewell, my Lord, we may never meet again. In the retreat where I shall live, between labour and prayer, I promise to remember you only from our first meeting, and I shall force myself to forget how sadly a nobleman mistook me and insulted me."

Could the younger Aramis have turned a deaf ear to such a noble plea? In years gone by, would he have met such gentleness with a yet viler trick? We shall never know. For he had not been as the others—(save for D'Artagnan's one ugly slip)—of wholly chivalrous faith, a Knight for whom woman was born to worship.

He could but shrug his shoulders before a mystery he scorned because he could not understand it—that "woman is capable of anything, even of doing good and acting well."

Yet, even in such degenerate times, Joel, the son of Porthos, discovers adventure enough and to spare. As becomes the hero of romance, he is plunged pell-mell into the slums of Paris, with its sixty lanterns for half-a-million inhabitants, and at once engaged upon the Defence of Dames and the slaughter of foot-pads. On the road from his country birth-place, venturing forth in search of the mystery-father of whom he knows no more than his nick-name, he had already rendered doughty service to the fair lady predestined for heroine of the tale.

Not knowing a soul in the strange city, chance and his own fiery nature at once involved him in two duels within twelve hours, rendering him a "little nervous" at the sight of his "first corpse."

But, "standing six feet in his stockings, with a fist that could smash paving-stones and a digestion that could relish them," he is, indeed, very son to Porthos:—

"The simple, fearless-hearted Porthos, true, smiling, invincible, disinterested, ready to lay down his life for others as though it was for that heaven had given him strength and riches. The noble Porthos who, with Aramis, and the slight assistance of Plouer with his crew of two, had slain over a hundred of his enemies."

Unsuspicious of the link that should have bound him to this country innocent, Aramis, quick to see the love springing between two young hearts, at once determined to make Joel the second instrument of his atrocious plot. To destroy the power of de Montespan and serve the interests of his Spanish master, Aurore was placed about Maria Theresa to catch the eye of the King by her beauty and youth, with Joel for complaisant husband to the new "favourite."

There was nothing unusual in such a scheme, nothing to shock the morals of the age. The puppets were chosen well, if only they had proved more complaisant. But no reader, ever so slightly acquainted with romance, will doubt the issue. Aramis had rescued the rash young Breton from the Bastille and, for a time, was able to convince the happy couple that he was sincerely their friend. But neither of them could safely be left to play their parts with their eyes shut, and when Joel knew what was expected of him, his repudiation was no less firm and far more violent than Aurore's.

It had been, indeed, a tragedy of ignorance that wove the web about the old man's feet. However far he had wandered from the heroic past, he remained loyal

to the memory of his friends. He would not, knowingly, have played thus with the son of Porthos.

Already he had reproached himself with the thought of how *they* would have scorned "the indignity of the act and the scoundrelism in its execution."

"D'Artagnan would swear with all the oaths in his Gascon vocabulary that what I do is of the meanest rescality; with the curl of his disdainful lip Athos would let the one word fall: 'Fie!' The good Porthos would say nothing, but his frank visage would broaden with amazement to see his comrade of the Bastion St. Gervais and the Locmaria sea-cave; Aramis the musketeer, the prelate and the conspirator; the man who had juggled with the crown and sceptre of France and with royal persons and destinies, acting the spider and panderer."

Only the Holy Father can absolve all crimes. "When I am Pope I shall cleanse myself." For Aramis had determined to stamp out Heresy, to seat himself in Peter's Chair. He knew, none better, that Joel "would break the King in twain like a dry twig," if he were allowed to remain in court to witness the evil that had been planned. Wherefore the brave youth must be sent away to the wars—to distinguish himself as he imagined—to serve the King.

"Danger and I," he proudly cried, "are two lions born in the same hour, but I am the older and the master."

When the story becomes a battle royal; on one hand the wily diplomat Duke, with all the power of the State behind him, stooping to drugs, poisons and hired desperados to seize and kill; on the other a simple country lad, with no weapons save his own good sword, his mighty arm and his mother-wit; with scarcely a friend in all France.

But there is something in Joel, certainly not inherited from his honest father, more kin indeed to Aramis himself, though D'Artagnan revealed the same

—unexpected—capacity. In reading of the musketeers we have most of us probably noticed with some surprise that while invariably quick to strike a blow, and in ordinary affairs the personification of rashness, their doughty leader, at any rate, was no less quick to scent the presence of danger, to suspect a trap, and—with almost miraculous intuition—to hold himself in, keep silence, play a part quite other than that of his proper self. Like the men of the jungle D'Artagnan had sharp ears and sharp eyes; the slightest scratch on wall, doorway, or window, the slightest turning of a key in the lock, the passing of a shadow across a drawn blind, the shaking of a twig in the bush, and his senses were all alert, to hear and to see what was certainly not meant for his ears and eyes, was, most probably, hostile to his object, if not to life itself.

Such, too, were the gifts of Joel, and like D'Artagnan, he lost no syllable of the whispered word, he recognised in an instant the sinister bearing it bore. He could carry in his head elaborate directions, given to those paid to murder or outwit him, every detail of a cunning campaign, every item of news learned about the enemy's camp.

Such quickness of mind, supported by courage and strength obviously beyond the eighty years of his powerful adversary, placed the victory where it properly belongs, in the hero's hands. Through many perils, unseen and foreseen, in which he was again and again at the point of death, Joel was just in time to save his lady's honour and to win the desire of his heart. When, at the last hour, Aramis learnt that it was his old friend's son he had so nearly duped and killed, the shock sent him to his grave.

In many Dumas novels, as we know, the hand of the collaborator has been at work; he employed able assistants, some of them added something of their own, or even produced independent work—to the confusion of the biographers.

For *The Son of Porthos* it must be said that authorship, in the phraseology of North Britain, is not proven. But we are too grateful for further news of old favourites, so exciting and so harmonious with their immortal youth, to question with undue severity the precise identity of the scribe.

' MARK WHITE.'

BIBLIOGRAPHY

NOTE:—*The Historical Romances by Alexandre Dumas should be read in the following order:—*

The Marguerite De Valois Romances

MARGUERITE DE VALOIS

CHICOT, THE JESTER

THE FORTY-FIVE GUARDSMEN

The Henry II. Romances

THE TWO DIANAS

The D'Artagnan Romances

THE THREE MUSKETEERS

TWENTY YEARS AFTER

THE VICOMTE DE BRAGELONNE

LOUISE DE LA VALLIERE

THE MAN IN THE IRON MASK

THE SON OF PORTHOS

The Regency Romances

THE CONSPIRATORS

(Chevalier D'Harmental)

THE REGENT'S DAUGHTER

The Marie Antoinette Romances

JOSEPH BALSAMO

THE COUNTESS DUBARRY

THE ELIXIR OF LIFE

THE QUEEN'S NECKLACE

~~TAKING THE BASTILLE~~ (Ange Pitou)

THE COUNTESS DE CHARNY

LE CHEVALIER DE MAISON ROUGE

Separate Stories~~THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO—VOL. I.~~~~THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO—VOL. II.~~

THE BLACK TULIP

THE CRIME OF THE BORGIAS

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CHAPTER I

FROM FATHER TO SON

THE mid-summer sun was flooding with light the calm and radiant landscape offered by the banks of the River Loire, near Saumur, in the month of July of the year 1678.

The coach running from Nantes to Paris was drawn by six good horses, but in consequence of the heat and dust, and undulating nature of the road, they were none too strong to overcome these difficulties, though lightened of the male passengers, who trudged on, while the lady inside slumbered. The five men were, a Nantes scrivener, a ship-outfitter, two sardine merchants of Croisic, and a gentleman-farmer, half-squire of some degree, who hailed from the parish of Locmaria, in Belle-Isle-en-Mer, of lasting memory from the siege narrated in our pages entitled "The Man in the Iron Mask."

Of the country squire he boasted the free carriage, slightly swaggering perhaps, the sunburnt complexion, the long hair coming down upon the shoulders, and the characteristic air of the rustic of that part of Brittany, namely, a medley of the simple and the astute, the timid and the tenacious. He wore the picturesque costume of these peasants, the white wool breeches cut full, the leather leg-boots embroidered with silk, the flower-pattern waistcoat, the braided vest, and the wide-brimmed felt hat encircled by a velvet ribbon, and plumed with a peacock's feather. Of the country nobility, he oft-times assumed the proud and haughty carriage of the head, the curt and imperious voice, a

sort of natural loftiness in the gestures, courtesy in the speech and elegance in the manners. Add to which, as the nobleman's insignia, a rapier at his side which would have appeared of extraordinary size and length for one so young, if he had not been gifted with a stature above the common, with limbs which testified his muscular strength and agility.

The aspect was splendid from the crest, from the bright hamlets under the eye to the red roofs of Saumur and its white citadel; but the travellers had something else to do than admire scenery. The would-be lawyer perspired at every pore, as he had wrung debtors into doing; the Paimboeuf ship-outfitter panted and the sardine-merchants grumbled. Still they muttered a few words about the market price of produce, the taxes, the good and the bad weather as they would affect the crops, and the disgrace of the financial superintendant Fouquet. Granted that the fall of this treasurer had taken place some time back, you cannot be hard on the rustics for not being versed in the latest court news. The young man from Belle-Isle slyly peeped at the lady-passenger as she slept.

Suddenly the jolting of the vehicle startled her, and in fear of being caught staring at her, the gazer rapidly turned his eyes aloof, and mechanically began to study the road. No sooner had he done so than he stopped short and hailed the guard of the coach who was also the driver, walking beside his horses:

"What, ho! what do you call that lot, my friend?"

He pointed to a squad of half a dozen horsemen, just looming up on a peak of the road, their profiles detached on the clear sky-line with the sharpness of shapes in a shadow-pantomime. Four of these cavaliers carried their musketoon resting for immediate use on the knee. The fifth, in advance of the rest, appearing to be the leader, carried no gun; but the sun sparkled on the pistol pommels sticking out of his holsters, and of the long sword slapping against his thigh.

Altogether, this was a little troop far from encouraging in a period when the main roads belonged to the boldest highwaymen.

Vincent Paquedru, the coach driver, had a hard face, apathetic look and feeble smile; his cunning was masked under a thick coat of assumed innocence. These rogues out-do any of their race elsewhere in artfulness.

"That is a company of the Royal Marauders," he answered tranquilly to the question put to him.

"Royal Marauders?" repeated the questioner, frowning, "a singular title, but no doubt a fitting one; for I do not like to think, Master Paquedru, that you intend to play tricks on me?"

Whilst speaking the youth laid his hand on the Norman's shoulder, but its weight was such that the knight of the whip felt as though he were overburdened.

"Heaven forbid, my dear sir," he replied, in haste, with an obsequious and wary air; "for it is the truth—I never tell a falsehood, on my word! that is how that regiment is spoken of in these parts."

"A regiment in the king's service so miscalled?"

"I am ignorant of that, my good sir," responded the driver, assuming his most stupid aspect; "but it is certain, I swear it with my hand on my heart, that it has been out on the campaign, ever so long."

"Out on the campaign? against whom, pray? as far as I know, for the moment, the province of Anjou has not risen against the king's authority—However," continued the young gallant, glancing at his travelling companions who had drawn near during his colloquy and listened to it with vague disquiet, "we have nought to fear, for they are just our number—five—and the game is even."

There rose general dissent, and the notary exclaimed: "But we have no arms!"

"Besides," said the sardine merchants, "it is not our business to bandy hard knocks!" To which his

brother dealer added: "We are respectable merchants who shun stripes and blows like the plague."

"On my part," continued the ship-outfitter, "I would not scruple to send all my seamen and office-clerks into battle to be slain to the last man—but unfortunately, they are either on my vessels at sea or in my offices in Paimboeuf."

"But, tell me, Master Paquedru," said the notary, "do you know that martial cohort?"

"I know them without pushing the acquaintance——"

"Do you mean to tell me you have met them before?"

"Yes, very often" was the Norman's reply, with a smile of bad omen, "in fact as often as I have pulled through this spot."

"In that event, how will they behave towards us?"

"Do not bother yourself about that," interrupted the young gentleman, "we shall not be long in finding out, for here they come at a gallop."

And the little squadron had clapped spurs to their horses, so that they came up rapidly. Having arrived within gunshot, they reined in, stopped by a sign from their commander, who approached at a walking pace. His followers drew up in a line across the way, to block it. Of these four, not one owned a visage that did not have "Robber" branded on it legibly. All the tanned cheeks wore ragged moustaches, and impudent gaze stared out under unkempt locks; scars ornamented the whole. But what equipments, costumes and steeds! The last as meagre as the lean kine of scripture; the hats dented, battered and worn; the hide breast-plates rotten and cracked, the breeches awkwardly patched, and the boots showing the riders' toes. On the other hand, each carried a good supply of weapons.

The captain was a trifle less haggard and threadbare. Some stitches had come out in his lace ruffles; only slightly faded were his doublet's purple velvet and his

flame-coloured ribbon; and his Spanish boots were almost perfect. Still his plumed beaver was spruced up with a new ribbon and was cocked slightly over one ear; his rapier hilt was polished enough to shine brightly; and his show of fashion had a touchy arrogance to impose up to a degree upon the novice and the timid. He would have inspired but scant confidence in the clear-sighted. His bird-of-prey beak bent over a pair of braggadocio's moustaches curled up into hooks at the ends, and turning grey; under them his lips were enlivened by an expression of vulgar cynicism. In his brown-encircled eyes, half-veiled by the bloated, drooping lids, gleamed all the yellow reflections of the "Seven Deadly Sins."

Accosting the coach passengers, he uttered with an exaggerated affectation of politeness, "Gentlemen, I ask you to consider me the most humble, obedient and devoted of your servants."

"And, sir, we are yours," said the scrivener, acting as spokesman for his companions, all trembling like an aspen leaf.

"Well, since nobody seems willing to present me, allow me to do it myself—" here he bowed. "You see the Chevalier Condor de Cordbuff, Colonel in his Majesty's service—when I say Colonel, it is just a manner of speaking, for the honour is of no importance at present, and between ourselves, the army is so badly officered that I hardly know whether I am captain or colonel, and my regiment—ahem! company would sound better—is composed for the time being of the four paladins whom you see yonder behind me: namely, Lock-breaker, my lieutenant, Plucker, my cornet, Pillager, my orderly, and Pickpurse my bugler—"

These strange names caused the would-be lawyer to quiver still more, the ship-chandler to turn very pale, and the sardine-dealers to look with despair at one another, while the cavalier proceeded:

"Now I am going to fill up my muster-list, and I have the recruits. Nothing but the equipment is wanting, which is the reason that I have solicited and obtained from the Provost of Saumur the honour of escorting and guarding honest gentry travelling through the country——"

"What," exclaimed the ship-outfitter; "Do you mean to say that you come only to——"

"To escort you safe into the town, and defend you if need be from all vexations, criminal exactions or guilty enterprises aimed at your life or your money-bags——"

A sigh of relief issued from each breast.

"And all for a miserable remuneration," continued the orator.

"Eh, eh? what now?"

"The figure being left to your kind estimate—provided, since I must confine the generosity of my patrons within the bounds of common sense, that each offers according to his mien, and his means——"

"Ah!"

Wonder, revulsion and terror, had quickly succeeded each other in the listeners' mind. One of the sardine-dealers, however, tried to give a proof of heroism.

"Just a moment," said he, roughening his voice, "suppose we do not wish for an escort guard——"

"Very good," continued his colleague, "suppose we do not yearn for the honour of your company?"

"In that event," replied Cordbuff, "I am no longer responsible for your precocious persons, and that will be a bad look-out, as there are any number of scamps in these parts," he said with great gravity, and with emphasis, "scamps whose arms are longer than their scruples, and who, in so dreary a spot as this, would shoot you off-hand without any hesitation."

He gave an order to his gang, and the triggers of their muskets were heard going at full cock.

This caused the notary to all but faint; the ship-

merchant wiped the perspiration off his brow with his sleeve, and the two sardine-dealers promised offerings to their patron saints if they should be extricated from this hornet's nest.

The Colonel of the Royal Marauders turned to the coach-driver, saying: "Be quick! Vincent, out with your book, and read me the names and description of your passengers."

The driver had the book already in his hand and he at once began to read:

"Master Libiniou, public notary, of Nantes——"

"That is well!" said Condor, with a delighted smirk, "men of the gown and men of the sword are specially king's men. I wager that you are only too glad of the opportunity to contribute a hundred pistoles for the harness of my heroes. Besides, as a keepsake of this happy meeting, I will make no bones over accepting that watch which I see sticking out of your pocket. Mine was stolen lately, in the parlours of the Comptroller-general, in Paris—M. Colbert receives sadly mixed company, as I have had the favour to tell him candidly."

He threw his hat, crown down, into the road and concluded:

"There you observe the cashier's till! Walk up, gentlemen, and settle. My dear notary, have the honour to superintend the revels!"

With many a moan the scrivener did as he was expected.

"Simon Prieur, ship-chandler, of Paimboeuf," continued the driver.

"One hundred pistoles. I am not going to insult a respectable tradesman by valuing him under a knight of the pen. To which sum, my honoured Prieur will please add the pair of silver buckles shining so brightly on his shoes. My noble father, Hilarion de Cordbuff, always longed to see his dear boy in buckles, and the wish of a father is law to a son——"

"Yves Guerinec and Pierre Trogoff, sardine-merchants, of Croisic——"

"Fifty pistoles each, the catch of fish being very good this season—not forgetting a pair of earrings you wear, and which I shall give to my sisters. I trust the gentleman will not compel me to take them out myself, as I am rather heavy handed and I am much afraid that I should take out a bit of the ear along with the trinkets." As he spoke he played with the dagger at his belt.

The two merchants and the naval outfitter hastened to imitate the notary, but muttering all kinds of curses while the Jehu continued:

"Squire Joel of Locmaria——"

"A squire? which one?" inquired the robber, from his saddle.

"It is I," responded the youth who wore the Breton costume.

It has already been stated that Joel was a promising young man, having limbs admirably proportioned to his stature in their supple and muscular strength. Picture Hercules or Samson as a boy. Still his face did not yet reveal the budding athlete, capable of strangling hydras or carrying away town gates. A plentiful supply of curls lit up his fine and regular features; his large eyes, inclined to deep grey, had a soft look, where frankness and just dealing were to be read as in a book, and around his lips, over which darkened a coming moustache as light in hue as his plentiful locks, a boyish smile now was sparkling with mirth, then shaded with thoughtfulness.

During the preceeding scene, he had leaned against one of the wheels, motionless but attentive and astonished—the coach having come to a rest, of course, owing to the highwayman's intervention.

"By the pride of Lucifer," exclaimed the latter, after having examined him, "here we have a young chanticleer, haughtily set on his spurs! and if the whim

takes him to swell the ranks of my company, deuce seize me but I would make a cornet aide-de-camp of him. What do you say to that, comrade? Do you not understand, eh?" he added as the listener remained silent.

"Yes, I do."

"And you agree?"

"No, because I have no desire to die by the hangman's rope."

"The young man has a taste for wit," growled Cord-buff, biting his moustaches, "and I am wrapped up in jolly fellows. So I allow you five minutes to make up your mind——"

"To do what, pray?" asked the other tranquilly.

"To accept service under my colours, or to count me down 'hush money' as recompense for losing a recruit so stout in make and so jovial in spirit. Well, have you any more on your bill?" he went on to the driver.

"Yes, we have the Lady Aurore du Tremblay."

"Dear me, some old dowager, I suppose. She must be rather old if she belongs to the family that once supplied a governor to the Bastille Prison. And where is the respected lady?"

"Do you want me?" answered a sweet and kindly voice.

The female opened the coach door and actively leaped out upon the sandy roadside.

She did not seem to be more than twenty. Her strong though pliant figure seemed shaped to do honour to the most sumptuous court costumes, although she was now wearing a dress of mourning and for the journey.

A thick mass of dark chestnut hair formed a kind of crown, in which faint flickers of golden radiance played. Her eyes were of opaque crystal, but from time to time they were lit by penetrating lustre. The smile of lips so beautiful agitated the heart. She walked with

an even step, with no evidence of fear or weakness, to Cordbuff's beaver, nearly filled with the contributions of her fellow travellers.

"Here, sir, is the money you are waiting for," she observed coldly.

"Pardon me, noble damsel," said Condor, perking himself in the saddle, "But I had not seen what you were like, otherwise you should have taken the lead of these gentry. Hang it all, where would we be, if we did not grant the sex, and rank and beauty, some privileges?"

The young girl extended her hand with a maidenly gesture and let a purse drop into the hat, saying:

"I give you half what I was carrying to town, and the other portion does not belong to me, but to two orphans, for whose cause I am going there to contest with the relatives and entreat the judges' favour. I venture to hope that you will not show yourself more greedy than the former and more hostile than the latter." All this was spoken with tranquil dignity, not devoid of marked haughtiness.

"But my soul, fair pleader," replied the colonel, twisting the points of his moustache between finger and thumb and speaking with mocking gallantry, "the cross kinsfolk are overcome and the judges won beforehand by the power of your attractions——"

"Sir!"

"Whence I draw the inference that your orphans have no longer need of the sum of which you expressed the wish not to be deprived, and to boot—you have no further need yourself of the diamond sparkling on your dainty finger to please and capture——"

"I am puzzled to understand——"

"Yet it is clear: the ring sparkling on your white hand will marvellously suit that of the girl of my love. You cannot think to keep me from it, any more than from the second half of the sum which you have so kindly handed over, and——"

Mdlle. du Tremblay raised her eyes to the bandit captain with a look full of apprehension.

"Why do you contemplate depriving me of this jewel, and the few gold pieces left me——"

"God love you! thank me for being so moderate. Gentlemen-riders of the king's highway would require much more.

Aurore clasped her hands.

"Sir, I repeat to you: I have yielded up all my own property—and this money which you want does not belong to me. I represent——"

So long as the lady had shown a firm front and some haughtiness, the brigand had pretended courtesy; but he became more insolent as she turned suppliant and agitated.

"Come, now," sneered he; "these orphan children will not be at a loss with an advocate having such charms and brightness of wit. Especially as you will not fail to find in Paris many generous friends——"

The young lady did not understand the drift of this speech, and implored as she saw the eyes of the scoundrel greedily fixed on the precious stone on her finger:

"But this ring has not the value which you fancy—it has no value indeed save to me as a present——"

"From some gallant, eh? Of course it is a keepsake of love. But, dash it all! you will have no difficulty in finding another to make a finer present."

At this remark the girl drew herself up to her full height and, as her eyes flashed with agitation, she said:

"Coward! is it because there is no man present to defend me that you presume thus to insult a lady?"

And she covered her face with her hands as though to prevent the additional outrage of the ruffian staring at her. Through this screen she was all the more lovely, so that Cordbuff's gaze became lighted with sudden and brutal lust. He abruptly urged his horse

towards Aurore, and from his throat this exclamation hoarsely issued:

"What, are we showing anger here? Be it battle, then! I shall not only take the ring but a kiss as well as price of the victory."

"Stand back! you shall only have the chastisement due to such insolence, you rascal!" broke in a thundering voice, as at the same time, an iron grip caught the adventurer by the waist and tore him out of the saddle as though he had been a child.

"Help!" cried the wretch, suffocated by the unexpected grip.

His four companions lowered their muskets to the level; but, already, Squire Joel—for it was none other who had sprung in between the lady and the Colonel of the Royal Marauders,—was holding the latter up and out at arm's length, much as a sportsman exhibits a rabbit to the yelping pack of harriers, and using him as a shield against the projectiles with which the muzzles aimed at him were menacing him.

"Go on," said he peacefully, "fire away if you like; but you will only fill the body of your chief with lead——"

"No, no, don't fire, in heaven's name! don't fire, for the devil's sake," moaned Cordbuff, in desperation.

The muskets were raised, but the Breton did not lower his buckler.

"Now, friends," he proceeded with the same serenity, "suppose we speak of business. I expect your guns carry each a bullet? Well, I have no objection to buying them—all four."

An outcry arose, and Lieutenant Lock-breaker eagerly demanded:

"How much for each?"

"Altogether, as much as my companions have put in that hat."

The four men looked at each other with astonishment, while the young man continued:

"Now, all you have to do is to empty your mus-

kets at the flight of birds flying yonder, and I will hand over to you all the spoil. Otherwise, beware! at the first show of resistance, I shall wring your captain's neck,—or, say, colonel's, the rank making no difference to me when I am wringing the neck of vultures—and I shall make use of his carcase to thrash every man-jack of ye, one down, the others take their turn after the style of my worthy tutor the priest of Locmaria."

During this harangue the unhappy Cordbuff presented the most piteous aspect; he was no longer cynical and sullenly mocking. The braggart's mask had been knocked off, and laid bare the wicked coward's vertigo of dread. In vain had he wrestled in his adversary's grasp. The wrist was as firm as iron pincers, and still held him like a ball-proof plate between the Breton's bosom and the robbers' bullets. The latter conferred together in an undertone.

"It is a bargain," declared Lock-breaker, finally making a sign to his comrades, who fired their muskets at the same time as his into the air.

"Take the money!" said Joel, kicking the hat with the toe of his boot.

The pseudo-lieutenant rode up, alighted, and clutched it. Mounting with the same rapidity, he did not return to his friends, who were waiting for him with greedy eyes, but clapped spurs to his horse, turned to the left, leaped the ditch separating it from the meadows, and galloped over the fields.

His companions rose with a loud shout: "Robber! false brother! oh, stop the thief!" Thus did Plucker, Pillager and Pickpurse protest against such an appropriation of one's neighbours' property, before rushing with a common impulse in pursuit of the runaway robber.

"Oh, our money! thief, our money!" so cried with one voice the man-hunters in their furious, breathless, and disorderly chase.

And "our money!" repeated the notary, ship-out-

fitter, and sardine-merchants as they beheld the purloiner of the hat and contents disappearing with his speedy followers in the depths of the horizon.

In the meanwhile, young Joel had replaced on his legs the redoubtable Knight of the Road, Cordbuff, still writhing from the grasp.

And drawing his long and heavy sword, he called out:

"Now, my captain of cut-throats, show us your blade. I do not want to settle you without some little defence on your part."

"Monsieur Joel, I ask you to allow me one request——"

The youth turned quickly, for it was the fair traveller who spoke. As the interruption was accompanied by a look of gratitude, our champion felt his heart palpitate in his breast. With his cheeks coloured with emotion, he respectfully doffed his hat, and replied with fire in his voice, gesture and countenance:

"A request from you I shall be only too happy to obey."

It was the lady's turn to blush and become perplexed, and she cast down her eyes. But, pointing to the Royal Marauder, she said:

"Let him go. I ask it as a favour."

"This knave?" said our hero, shaking his head:

"Really, my lady, this rascal has insulted you—and I must slay him at your feet."

"Holloa!" interrupted Cordbuff, trying to brazen it out, "you may have found it very easy to unsaddle me by surprise, as it has been your luck to do, but——" Here he put his hand on his swordhilt, but slowly and without any enthusiasm, for his adversary was already on his guard.

Aurore interposed once again, saying: "Oh, do not fight."

"And why not," remonstrated the young man.

"Did you not give me your word?"

But our hero was as obstinate as a Breton.

"To be sure," he said, "if I were alone in question, I should make the sacrifice of my wrath and my rancour: but it was to a lady that the insult was offered. Now, the old soldier who brought me up often repeated to me: when anybody is deficient in respect due to a lady in a gentleman's presence, his sword ought to leap out of its scabbard of its own accord and never be sheathed until the offence is apologised for."

"So you refuse me?"

"Oh, please ask me any other."

"It is still the only one which, at present, I desire to make. Come, you are noble?"

The youth hesitated before proudly replying:

"I come of blood on the sire's side."

"And I am Yolande Henriette Aurore of the Tremblays, daughter of Baron Louis Maximilian du Tremblay, in his life-time, honorary counsellor and register as well as lieutenant for the Marshals of France for the province of Anjou wherein we now are; and I—in the name of my sire and myself, and of the tribunal of Honour which he represented and of all the nobility submissive to its jurisdiction—I forbid you to cross steel with this ragged captain——"

"Oh!" ejaculated Cordbuff.

"And mark this well: it is no longer a matter of doing me a favour, for what I am telling you binds you as surely as if the sergeant of constabulary touched you with his crowned staff on the shoulder—I am speaking to you in the name of the king and for honour's sake. To place yourself on a footing with such a thing would be to lose caste, forfeiting your own self-respect and what you owe to the traditions of dignity legated to you by your ancestors; lastly, you inflict on the order to which we both belong, an insult a hundred times more flagrant than that which you stubbornly seek to avenge—an insult," concluded the

lady, "which I should never forgive you whilst I live."

After the speaker reminded Joel of his rank, nobility and ancestors, you might see his face suffuse with blushes, and he was as much embarrassed as surprised at the effect of this language upon him. On the other hand, it is a fact that he had but a faint idea of the famous tribunal on the point of honour, instituted in the previous reign to prevent duels between wearers by right of the sword, often intervening to stop quarrels after hearing the complaints.

"I consent," he said, confronted with the lady's last words and the resolute tone which marked them, and he restored his weapon to its sheath. "Let it pass," he said to Cordbuff. "Begone! and thank this lady that I let you go."

During the conversation between the squire and the young lady, the highwayman had mounted his horse. The travellers did not in truth pay any attention to him, or to the dialogue. They were still gazing in the direction in which their "poor money" had flown in the care of the ingenious Lock-breaker, whose trio vainly gave him chase with all the powers of their worn-out steeds.

As for the driver, Paquedru, he was searching in the dust to see if any coin had escaped from the stolen hoard.

A cry of savage joy replied to Joel's boon. It was from Cordbuff who bounded into his saddle, where he took the bridle between his teeth, and drew a pistol from each holster.

"So, so! you grant me mercy, do you, my pair of turtle doves? but I am not going to spare you!"

He took aim and fired both weapons at the same time. But the young man with the swiftness of thought, had flung himself before the other target. A streak of blood was marked on his forehead, and he reeled as

he carried his hand to his chest. Aurore uttered a loud shriek.

"Good-bye to you, my Hector!" shouted the robber, intoxicated with rage and triumph. "As for you, my pretty dear, we shall have a happier meeting next time!"

Spurring his steed, he was off like a flash. In his way was the group formed by notary, sardine-merchants and ship-outfitter, who were all four rolled in the dust. Before the lightest of them rose to his feet, Condor was at a distance. Let us do them the justice to say that; instead of flying in pursuit, they all rushed to assist the youth, whom Paquedru had hastened to support. But here an unexpected incident happened: it was not the wounded man who fell, for he kept on his feet and rejected aid, but the girl. The sight of the blood trickling out of the wound received on her behalf and tearing the defender's brow, had given her a twinge at the heart. She closed her eyes; her features were covered with deadly pallor: and her body so collapsed that the young squire had barely time to open his arms to sustain her. He bent over the girl with his face bedewed with blood, and forgetful of his own state, from the anxiety which this sudden swoon caused him, he called:

"Mademoiselle, return to your senses! What has happened? Were you hit? In heaven's name, speak, I beg of you!"

But there was no answer, for Aurore's swoon turned to hysterics. Spasmodic movements thrilled her limbs, and dull moaning came from her bosom. Paquedru and the travellers bustled about her to offer their best services.

"Thump her on the back!" suggested the driver.

"Who carries smelling salts?" inquired the notary.

"A good glass of cider would fetch her to," counselled Guerinec.

"With spice and a little pepper," added his mate.

The ship-outfitter was for the most simple remedy, for he suggested:

“There is nothing like a dash of cold water.”

At this juncture, the rolling of a carriage was heard on the road.

“If that brings a doctor, all will be well,” remarked the scrivener.

And all turned their eyes to see what heaven—or the other place—was sending them.

CHAPTER II

TWO OLD FRIENDS

THE carriage which came towards the coach in distress, was only a quarter of a league distant when the affray was taking place. It had four first-class post-horses which sent the showers in sparks from the stones in the road. Around the vehicle galloped half a dozen strapping footmen; swart and of martial appearance, who carried a sword by the side and musketoon at the saddle-bow.

Inside on the back-seat, an old gentleman was seated, who still wore the long hair reaching the shoulders, and the fine moustache and *royale*, or goatee, of the reign of Louis XIII.

This venerable man was of remarkable appearance. He had retained of good looks the eagle-like profile: a broad forehead impressed with majesty, a perfect mouth, by a miracle preserving enviable teeth, a chin of correct outline, albeit prominent and angular; as well as dark eyes of piercing lustre, and feet and hands of which many a princess would be proud. He was clad in black velvet, with a small skull-cap apparently to conceal where he had been shaven, like a priest.

But his hair was white, and chin-tuft and moustaches

were blanched likewise. The thin frame seemed near to snapping in two. The sallow complexion would have delighted the lovers of antiques. The features were hooked rather than purely aquiline; the forehead was lined with wrinkles and the lips were so thin that the mouth resembled a slit with a knife. Distended lids drooped to mask the fire of the sight; and the hands had waxen-hues and cracked at the knuckles like those of skeletons amid the clouds of rich lace which half smothered them.

On the front seat, facing this man in the sere and yellow of age dozed another old man, but of corpulent habit.

He affected to maintain the attitude towards the gentleman of an old servant—both familiar and respectful. He seemed to be about the same age as his master, and like him, wore a black suit, of clerical appearance. This was worn with dignity on a body which good living had given the rotundity of the conventional abbots of the days of good cheer. His visage was in keeping with his figure. Between puffy cheeks a squat nose withdrew from view, after the former had robbed the other features: his chin retired from a layer of puff paste, rather than healthy flesh, and this had threatened to blind him. His hair, no less white than his opposite neighbour's, was cut squarely and sanctimoniously down at three lines of his brows. We now hasten to recall to the reader that his forehead in its most open days had never boasted more than an inch and a half.

At the time when we peer in at them, the master was brooding and the attendant was still dozing.

At a jolt, the former exclaimed:

"Monsieur Bazin!"

The other opened his eyes and stammered:

"Did your reverence address me?"

The other replied with a smile:

"You forget, my dear Bazin, that I am no

'Reverence'; a full score of years have gone by since I was bishop of Vannes and ceased to belong to the Church Militant—having renounced looking after the salvation of others to take care of my own."

"Ah, I fear me," sighed the fat fellow, "that it is the sooner to reach it by the way of penitence, then, that we have quitted Madrid, where life flowed so gently—to race up and down dale, instead of dwelling in prayer and repose over the remnant of days which may be granted to us upon this earth——"

"Just so; and I would observe in connection with your remark, that we are proceeding very slowly. I am in haste to arrive as soon as possible. Bid the postillions make haste!"

"But we are going a round-about way! The road is a rough one and a horse may fall. Your Excellency will bear in mind that an upset might be fatal at your age."

His Excellency shrugged his shoulders in unconcern.

"Speak for yourself, Master Bazin. You are seventy-five, truly; and I am but thirty-eight—twice told!"

"But, my lord duke!"

"Stop!" impatiently interrupted the Duke of Almada. "Do as you are bid, and cease to load me with titles which will draw the attention of the inquisitive upon me. Recollect that I am to preserve the strictest incognito until we reach Paris."

"Then what title shall I style you?"

"Call me the Chevalier d'Herblay."

"Call me the Chevalier d'Herblay," reiterated the servitor, clasping his hands. "Good heavens! as in the time of riding at full gallop affrays and running folks through with sword and dagger: verily, why should not my lord assume at once his old habits, the sword and boots and cassock of the Royal Musketeers, with the title?"

The aged noble shook his head, muttering:

"Not so, Aramis is no more. He is dead with his three companions-in-arms, three friends—three brothers! Aramis has gone into the dust with Athos, Porthos, and D'Artagnan. How is it that not one of them has left a son or even a daughter to continue the glorious name? It seems to me that a spark of such glory should still exist! Oh, were that the case, with what joy I should nourish it, and fan it into a flame so that men by that light might perceive what lustre we four shed on the corps of royal lifeguards and on the name of Frenchmen." Resuming a dry voice, he said aloud: "I repeat that I am for the present, and wish solely to be, the Chevalier d'Herblay."

"Your wishes shall be obeyed," grumbled the stout man, who with his grossness had not been blessed with the good humour which had only increased in his fellow-servant, the worthy Mousqueton; "Enough is said. We shall conform to the wishes—that is, the will of the Chevalier. But, if we are going to plunge anew into the life of adventures, I shall hand in my resignation as steward: despite my age, I have not the faintest longing to join so soon in eternity, whither were too hastily hurried by fatigue suffered and hard knocks borne, my poor comrades, Planchet, Grimaud and Mousqueton."

CHAPTER III

THE STRANGE DOCTOR

As we have said the rumble of a vehicle startled the consolors of Mdlle. du Tremblay, by the side of the stopped stage-coach. In a few moments up came the Chevalier d'Herblay's carriage, in a cloud of dust, with the swiftness and rolling of thunder. It had nearly reached the group around the lady and her fellow-travellers who were in the middle of the way. The postilions and the outriders were obliged to make a

detour with the horses, whose bits were white with froth.

"Stand aside there!" shouted the lackeys of the escort, while the post-boys yelled: "Make room there, look to yourselves!"

At the same time the old nobleman lowered one of the windows and asked, "What is the matter?"

"Hold, whoever you are," called out Squire Joel, "and come to our aid. This young lady whom you see is hurt!"

"A lady hurt? Stop, boys! rein in, lackeys! Wait a little, sir: I am at your orders."

The order was obeyed. The carriage door was opened, and the noble alighted with an ease not expected in one of his age. He briskly stepped up to our hero, and with an accent of surprise exclaimed: "And you are wounded!"

"I! it is nothing—only a scratch. I prithee, do not heed me."

The old gentleman had given the fair frank face a look as of one who was reminded of a resemblance, but the girl's had the stronger attraction, and her great beauty, as she reposed in the Breton's arms, drew from him an outcry of involuntary admiration.

"Rest assured," said he, after a brief examination, "No danger is to be feared. This person is simply under the sway of one of those violent attacks of nerves, often felt by females after violent emotions. Without being a great physician, I warrant that I can relieve her." He raised his voice, and called: "Hillo, there, you, Esteban, Pedrillo! bring a mantle! and you, Bazin, let me have my travelling surgical-case."

The articles being promptly brought, the improvised physician continued: "Lay out the cloak on the ground, and place the young lady upon it. That is right. Now, somebody kneel beside her and support her head."

Joel would not resign to any one the care of carry-

ing out these orders. From his case the latter took out a bronze-bladed knife and a small crystal phial. He bent over Mdlle. du Tremblay and used the knife to force her teeth open, with great caution. This slight lock-jaw overcome, after a spasm, he introduced past her lips the phial and poured out one or two drops of the liquid contents. Soon, the colour began to return to the pale cheeks, and the heaving of her bosom subsiding, her moanings and convulsions ceased also.

"Did I not tell you so?" remarked the friend in need, rising. "This calming medicine is good for affections of this nature. Our patient is now out of danger."

"But she has not yet opened her eyes," remarked the Breton.

"Because to the period of excitement succeeds that of prostration which is a natural consequence; but the young lady will not be long regaining her senses, and she has nothing to fear from an accident, which, all things considered, is very common in her sex. But," feeling once more a strong and unaccountable interest in the youth, "will you not think of having your wound attended to?"

"Wound!" said Joel, with a careless gesture, "a bandage saturated with salt and water, and it will not even leave a mark. 'Tis only a graze—the bullet merely glanced off the temple."

"But you stood two shots," remarked the notary, with professional accuracy.

"What became of the other?" Simon Prieur wanted to know.

"It seemed to me that it struck you in the chest," continued the coachdriver.

"We saw it stagger you," added both the dealers in sardines.

From the time when the lady was pronounced out of peril, the youth seemed to recover all his good humour.

"Ah!" said he, gaily, "the knave did aim well. I caught the bullet under my breastbone, but, you see, it flattened on a leather belt which carries my little fortune under cover, and my five hundred livres in hard cash are as safe as the bank. If it had been paper money, it would have been bored through, and my stomach would have had a leak in it likely to interfere with the hearty digestion of my meals. As it now transpires, I am merely bruised. Still it was a pretty hard knock."

"I compliment you on your escape," said the old noble affectionately: "you placed your money where it did you good service! I never knew but one who could have stood up against a shock like that. I should like to hear the whole story," he went on, consulting a large old-fashioned watch set with brilliants: "but time presses, and besides, our patient still needs our attention. Is it your sister, by chance? Your betrothed, by good fortune?"

"I only know her from having travelled in her company these four-and-twenty hours."

"Do you know her destination?"

"I think she is for Paris, like the rest of us."

"Is there no relative of hers among your company?"

The bystanders answered in the negative.

"In that case, I offer to see her there in safety," declared the chevalier.

"Take her away?" exclaimed Joel.

"Oh," returned the master of Bazin, smiling, "only as far as the termination of her journey. "Where do you change horses at Saumur?" he went on to inquire of Paquedru.

"At the 'Golden Heron' Inn, in the Rue St. Jean, where the travellers have time allowed for refreshment."

"How long does it take to reach it?"

"An hour at least."

"Well, you will find your lady traveller there,

carried in my coach in an hour or so before you, and in that gained time she will have rested and received such cares from the servant-girls as her condition can have from those of her sex only."

The coachman bowed as one who says: "As it may please your lordship."

D'Herblay waved his hand for his followers to bear the girl into his carriage.

"Put her in my place," he said. "I will sit along with Bazin on the front seat."

Just as two of the lackeys stepped towards Mdlle. du Tremblay to carry out the order, Joel took a step himself to interpose his body between them and the lady, still lying insensible upon the mantle.

"But," he faltered.

The nobleman eyed him in such a lofty manner that he stopped, unable to continue his protest.

"My young friend," said the old gentleman quietly, "Surely I am not compelled to ask you by what right you interfere to oppose this act of humanity?"

Ashamed, the youth hung his head, as the gentleman proceeded, while the footmen carried Aurore into the vehicle, "No matter! Say no more. I accept as expressed the regret to be read upon your countenance, and I forgive you with a true heart for having forgotten that a lady is always safe under my honour."

About half-an-hour afterwards, his carriage stopped before the "Golden Heron" at Saumur.

The noise of the horses breathing hard, with their froth-flecked flanks heaving and smoking, the bells jangling round their necks, the postboys' whips cracking as hard as they could sound them, and the lackeys shouting, "House, ho!" as they got out of the saddle, caused the landlord, Master Hermelin, with wife, two daughters and all his household, to receive the traveller who arrived with so uproarious and sumptuous a turnout.

"I want the host?" challenged the latter from the interior.

"I am he, my lord," rejoined the host, bowing like a clown in the circus.

"Make ready the best bed in your best room."

"Certainly, my lord." With well-founded pride, he added: "The best bed stands in the best room, my lord, and that is my own."

Without heeding this remark, the speaker had alighted and he turned with gallantry to offer his hand to Mdlle. du Tremblay, saying:

"Come, my dear girl."

She stepped down in her turn; she had completely regained consciousness, but she was in need of support as she was weak and pale from the sudden shock.

"Really, sir, I do not know how to repay——"

"Do not speak of it!" interrupted the old noble, laying a finger on his lips, "not another word. Your physician extraordinary forbids you to fatigue yourself by talking." He beckoned the daughters and chambermaid of the host and ordered them to take great care of the lady. "Show her to the rooms taken by me, which are at her disposal. My steward accompanies you, to let me know if anything requires my presence. Go, go, my charming patient," he concluded to Aurore, "and take the rest which you stand in need of. I will tell you when I think you may be roused for the resumption of your journey. Then, allow me to be thanked for a service which, however, any gentleman would have shown you in my stead."

Mdlle. du Tremblay gave him a smile of gratitude, and entered the inn, leaning on Dame Hermelin's arm and followed by the latter's daughters, as well as by Bazin, who grumbled in an undertone at the incident and the burden imposed upon him.

The chevalier was about to do likewise when a man, seated on the stone bench by the doorway, rose and

bowed to him so pointedly that the old noble ejaculated:

"Ah! unless I am much mistaken we have M. de Boislaurier at Saumur. But any time and place are good where you are met with."

"The pleasure is on my side," replied the other, again saluting, "what joy to meet so unexpectedly——"

"The Chevalier d'Herblay," suggested the traveller, laying significant stress on the title under which he desired to be known.

A nod from Boislaurier showed that he had taken the hint. He was a man of good age, and with a face serious and discreet. Booted and spurred like a royal messenger, he was clad in a hunting dress of velvet, with feather to the hat and ribbons of the same hue. After shaking hands with the new-comer, he spoke aloud with the intention of being overheard:

"I had an appointment with a friend in this town to go stag-hunting; but some business must have detained him on his estate for I have been vainly waiting a couple of days."

"And you are in desperate tedium?"

"Just so! I commenced to lose patience, and very little would start me back to town."

"If you have no objection, you might do me the honour to keep me company this evening."

In chatting thus the two entered the dining-room.

"Will you gentlemen do me the honour of taking meals under my roof?" queried the host, bowing as though he had a hinge in the lower part of his spine, for these were customers of importance.

"Confound me, but the appeal is well rounded," observed the chevalier, "and the salutations smack of the court fashions. No one would think of seeing Versailles at Saumur."

"Well," said the host proudly, "the reason is that

I have not always lived in the country; I may tell you that I cooked for the Marquis de Villeroy."

"The royal groom-in-waiting? and one of the daintiest *gourmets* in the realm of France! Plague on us but the cheer ought to be appetising here! Would you like us to test it in company, my dear Lord of the Boislauriers?"

"How can you ask me! most willingly! It will be both an honour and a pleasure to sit at your table."

"In that event, it is a settled thing," said M. d'Herblay, turning to the host. "We will dine, friend. Serve in half an hour; and distinguish yourself, without any fear of our looking at the bill too closely. Away to the kitchen! Meanwhile, this gentleman and I will renew an old acquaintance."

"I go, my lords, and you will be satisfied, I vow." And the delighted landlord-and-cook departed with many a salaam.

CHAPTER IV

HOW ROYAL FAVOURITES DEPART THIS LIFE

THE door had no sooner closed behind the host than the elder nobleman turned quickly to his guest, and inquired in a low voice, dropping the jovial tone which he had adopted:

"I suppose you came here expressly on purpose to see me, eh, Boislaurier?"

"That is so, my lord the duke," was the respectful reply.

"And you come on behalf of Father Lachaise, the royal confessor?"

"It was he who pointed out to me the route you chose to reach Paris——"

"The sea route, *via* Bayonne and Saint Nazaire——"

"In continuation, it was he who sent me to your

grace, and I waited in this town, where I was certain that our meeting would not attract attention."

"You have done well. For at least some time my return into France should be kept from the king and court. Do you bring me news?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Oh! how serious you speak."

"Most grave, indeed. Judge for yourself—the royal favourite is dead."

"Mdlle. de Fontanges dead?"

"Alas! that is so."

"And scarcely twenty! it is shocking! no, no, it cannot be true!"

"It is only too true; and I am charged by the reverend father to acquaint your grace with all the particulars of the mysterious affair."

"Mysterious, say you?"

"So much so, that history itself may remain puzzled to fathom it."

The traveller frowned as he listened, seated. With a wave of the hand, he invited the messenger to be seated, when, leaning towards him as if he feared that the walls had ears, he said:

"Come, come, enough of this! I want facts. Speak without reticence and omit nothing which might enlighten me."

"The new La Vallière," said Boislaurier, slowly, "committed three mistakes: she insulted Madame de Montespan by parading her triumph in winning the king away from her, and the proud Athenais——"

"I knew her as Mdlle. de Tonnay-Charente," interpolated the auditor.

"Does not readily forgive. The second error was to take into her service a valet who came from her supplanted rival's household; and the third to accept from this fellow's hand a cup of milk, and drink it off at a draught one evening when she was warm and thirsty."

He who was called Aramis was not a sensitive man. His heart was parched, like that of all old men who have been admirers of the fair sex or much appreciated by them. Hence he had listened without wincing to the tragic story of the poor mock-queen of a day, cut off in all the flower of her youth and beauty and royal favour.

"So, so!" he confined himself to saying: "Let me tell you that this is a dreadful accusation that you are setting afloat."

"It is not of my invention, but public opinion circulated under the cloak, in the court and town—it is what circumstances point to—what the inquest has brought out. President Lareynie and his Ardent Chamber being commissioned by his majesty to investigate the matter of the wholesale poisoning which terrified the whole capital."

"What is the outcome of this inquest?"

"It is established conclusively that Madame de Montespan tried to remove her rival by infected garments and gloves offered to her by two villains: namely, a servant named Romani and a Lyons silk merchant's clerk named Bertrand; and after applying to a regular professional poisoner, known as La Filastre, the marchioness determined to rely on La Voisin to make away with Mdlle. de Fontanges without the manner being plain. She used, as an accomplice, her own maid, the Desœille's girl."

"Is it not a fact that this Voisin woman was tried, sentenced and executed?"

"Yes, my lord, and in great haste lest she spoke——"

"I should have thought that she was put to the torture to make her prattle——"

"They did so, my lord, but on an order from the king at St. Germain's, her statement was taken on separate paper from the official records so that his majesty might destroy them without the tribunal at

the Royal Arsenal having any cognisance of them. So were treated the statements of La Filastre. The questioning of Romani and Bertrand was deferred. In the last place, the Minister Louvois brought about a meeting between the king and his discarded mistress in which the latter passed from weeping to recrimination and thence to a very high-handed manner——”

The hearer made a gesture of impatience.

“ I cannot say that it is hard to imagine the interview,” he remarked phlegmatically. “ Here you have the monarch questioning but not without agitation, and he accuses the woman, there; he asks for admissions which are indignantly refused and he cannot even wring evidence of repentance. The culprit commences to weep. Soon, according to woman’s inevitable tactics, she inverts the proper order of things—she takes the offensive, and reproaches her judge with his infidelity towards her—the primary cause of her false steps and crime. It was jealousy that forced her to commit it! an excess of passion—the flame of love which devoured her! Men willingly excuse the crime of which they were the origin. Louis, who flatters himself that he is a god, after once smiling on those who told him so when he should have laughed at them—Louis is as much a man as others. I can imagine him putting faith in these protests, drinking in this adulation like incense, and growing intoxicated on his adoration as upon so much nectar. After all, it is only a riot in a harem. A sultana murders another; and merely to be alone in keeping to the universal idol. What a piece of flattery for his pride! For your Olympian Jove, whose frown shakes combined Europe, is weaker than a school-boy, simpler than an errand-boy, and more trustful than his shopkeepers of Paris, when touched by his sense and tickled by his self-conceit. This is so true that he forgave all, pronounced it justified, and sets up the proud Athenais in court firmer and more mighty than ever.”

"So great," agreed M. Boislaurier, "that the Empire and the United Provinces deem it proper to consult her by ambassadors."

The veteran plotter stared at the speaker with astonishment.

"How now—what are you telling me there?" he said.

"I say that an envoy of the Prince of Orange and another from the Court of Vienna have been conferring with the royal favourite on the arrangements of the peace to be soon concluded."

"Peace!" echoed M. d'Herblay, with a start; "are we to have a treaty of peace signed? Are you in your right mind, my poor Boislaurier?"

"Peace will be signed, my lord; in assurance of which it is settled that the town of Nimwegen shall be the place of meeting for the plenipotentiaries who will discuss the conditions."

"Stop! what about Spain, whom I represent; it went into the coalition against Louis XIV. only on the urgent entreaties of the emperor and the Stadtholder—is not Spain to be informed of an event of this importance?"

"That is as unknown at St. Germain's as it is at La Haye and Vienna. Still, nothing is more certain. It is Holland that is getting ready to be the first to part with the coalition. William of Nassau has despatched an agent to Paris charged to present La Montespan a present of ten thousand ducats, if she will persuade his majesty not to be hard on the Dutch republic, which has suffered the most from the war and is the most worn out."

"How has the marchioness received the offer?"

"She answered that she will do her utmost to influence his majesty into evacuating the hostile territory, surrender Maestricht and pay half the campaign expenses."

"And what about the emperor, what has he asked and what will he give?"

"He has put an income of ten thousand florins at the favourite's feet, in exchange for which she had promised to restore Philipsburg——"

"And Charles II., my august master, where is he in this participation and distribution?" He spoke with a shade of irony.

"Being isolated, the King of Spain will be obliged to accept these conditions, and will probably have to cede to France Burgundy and other places which——"

"You need not specify—the more you have to eat the more you want. Decidedly, King Louis should not have taken the emblem of the sun—the crab, which with its legs outspread does not badly represent the radiant orb, would suit him better," and the old duke, having extended his fingers to illustrate his simile, cracked the joints. "How did you learn all this?" he finally inquired.

"She is entirely devoted to us is this maid of the marchioness's, Desœillets, and she obtained copies of letters exchanged between her mistress and both the envoys, for Father Lachaise."

"Long live letter-writing! the originals speed afar in the mails, but the copies remain."

An instant's silence succeeded, after which the arch-plotter resumed with a wrinkled brow and low tone:

"M. de Boislaurier, what thus is meditated, must not take place. I grant that France is the country of my birth, but Spain is that by adopting me. There was I welcomed when I was, as a proscribed fugitive, hunted out of Belle-Isle with fire and sword by order of Louis XIV. Spain made me Duke of Almada, conferred the title of Grandee upon me, and entrusted me with the care of its interests at the court of St. Germain's. I must not allow my second mother to be humbled, a little as regards myself and a great deal as regards her. Spain is the Roman Catholic power above all: the lessening of its influence in the European concert will be counter to our justifiable views. Reflect,

moreover, that the alliance of France with the Dutch Calvinists and the German Lutherans will deal a terrible stroke to the Company of Jesus, to which both of us belong, while I am the supreme chief. Our enemy is Protestantism. It brings with it that spirit of free scrutiny which is the ruin of the Church's power, based as that is upon the faith of the masses. For a long period France has been at the head of Europe. If Protestantism takes a footing here—and it has long rooted itself in the Cevennes—if it overspreads it and finally gains the upper hand, then it will hold the empire of the world. Persecution will be turned against us; the Sons of Loyola will be dislodged, obliged to disappear under shame, hunted and tracked—glad to take refuge in the exile of Calvin, the dungeon of Luther and even the pyre of Huss and Dolet——”

“God knows that I share your ideas,” observed the messenger, “and the same apprehensions; but what can we do to prevent it?”

The ex-musketeer gave one of those smiles which had bewitched while they perplexed “Marie Michon,” half a century ago.

“Am I not in the van of the battle?” he rejoined. “All is well, since you have apprised me. To be forewarned is forearmed. Unarmed, I should wage a cruel war; armed, I am a thousand strong in my single charge. Is it forgotten how I coped with Cardinal Richelieu, who was a great man, and overcame Mazarin, who was a great politician? I grant that, in those times, I had such aids as are lacking to me now.” And a shadow clouded the brow of him who had accomplished such elevated aims when planned and executed in the company of the three musketeers and the queen's guardsman, D'Artagnan. “Still, it was I alone who drew from the dungeon where state reasons consigned him—the twin brother of the reigning sovereign, that second son of Anne of Austria whom I substituted upon the throne of France for the royal

lover of La Vallière, Fontanges and Montespan. The enterprise was incredible, unheard-of and senseless, if you like, but it would have completely succeeded had it not been wrecked against the honour of a sublime idiot—Fouquet. Well, he is expiating to-day in the Castle of Pignerol his foolish grandeur of mind and imbecile loyalty, and the true prince, who failed me at the right moment, is also expiating his weakness in an iron mask, if he has not been done to death in some obscure fortress. Let them rot who broke when they were my valuable tools. Ah, believe me, Boislaurier, when one has undertaken tasks of such magnitude, and measured themselves with such adversaries—he has no dread or care about a court doll."

For want of breath the ex-revolutionist, once Bishop of Vannes, and eternal intriguer, stopped in this recurrence of youthful ardour. It was after a pause that he continued, in a calmer and more leisurely mood:

"Good Fontanges would have been a precious tool to us, and her lack of intelligence would have served us better than all the wit of all the Mortemarts. But we must replace the instrument out of repair with another. We have to drive out the ally of the Emperor and William of Nassau. We need not stoop to have recourse to the criminal hand which distils poisons and the more guilty one which pours it out." He said this without a twinge of conscience, for he may not have clearly remembered how the Franciscan died from the effects of the potion administered at Fontainebleau; and yet Aramis obtained the generalship of the Jesuits all the speedier through that draught. "We will defeat the marchioness with her own weapons, by opposing to her in the king's heart a woman with charms more intoxicating, subjugating and fascinating. This creature, more of an enchantress, will be no less docile than Fontanges, and devoted to our plans."

"The Reverend Father Lachaise and I have been turning this over in our minds; but it is not so easy

a matter as may be fancied. Consider, indeed, that all the court beauties have already tried to captivate the erratic monarch without being able to rule him in any appreciable degree; the reign of such as Soubise and Ludre lasted only for a short while——”

“That is why I am not going to court to find this Circe.”

“Where else is there a woman to fascinate a king?”

“I hardly know; but when I must find an object, rest easy about its forthcoming.”

“Heaven hear your lordship!”

“The King of kings gives ear to the lowest. It is not for the want of praying heartily that I shall fail to be heard.” So said Aramis, with his smile like the Sphinx’s. “In the meanwhile, let us dine without misgiving,” he added in a tone become light, “and fortunately, here comes our host to announce that it is on the table.”

It was Hermelin, indeed, who informed them with many cringes, that he desired to know if they wanted him to set their table in the ordinary dining-room.

“Why not?”

“Because the travellers by the Nantes coach will expect to occupy the other table under the window.”

“And what matters? good company does not annoy us,” replied the old noble kindly.

A few minutes afterwards, the jingling of bells and trampling of hoofs, with the rumble of wheels, intimated that the coach, delayed by the highwaymen, had at last arrived.

CHAPTER V

A QUEEN WANTED—OF THE LEFT HAND

THE conveyance having lumbered up, presented the appearance of having had a rough time of it, for almost instantly the passengers made an incursion into the dining-hall. Last of all entered the young squire, as he had stopped in the kitchen to apply to his wounds that simple cure of salt and water which, perhaps, after all, was as healing as the famous balm which Madame d'Artagnan had of the gipsy. On the threshold he began to look for some one. Perceiving M. d'Herblay, commencing with the soup, he quickly walked up and questioned him:

"Monsieur, will you kindly inform me when I can see Mdlle. du Tremblay?"

"The lady," replied the chevalier, "reposes at present, but I have every reason to believe that she will shortly be able to resume her journey."

"I thank you heartily," the young man pursued. "Allow me to present my most humble and sincere apologies for—for—" he faltered, "a bad thought that I entertained."

The duke smiled in a mild and friendly way.

"I know," he answered with a little slyness; "you thought I had eloped with your travelling-companion——"

Joel cast his eyes down, as the old gentleman continued with a shake of his head:

"Oh, youth! mother of all follies! still you need only to have seen my white hairs to be sure how unreasonable was your supposition."

"Rather say, stupid, odious!" exclaimed our hero, blushing with shame; "you see me in consequence so confused that I cannot express myself; but I am

fresh from the country, a wild rustic, and pray let that be my excuse."

The old man patted him on the shoulder affectionately and somewhat as a bishop might do.

"I forgive you for that. Have your dinner in peace, and sin no more by thinking evil of your neighbour."

"Dinner? why, I was not thinking of such a thing—I had such a weight on my heart."

But it would appear that the weight was suddenly removed, for the youth joined his travelling-companions who had begun on the meal with a quarter of an hour's start, he rapidly made up for lost time.

Boislaurier called his friend's attention to this.

"Yes; he has a good appetite. It reminds me of my poor Porthos!" Then, raising his voice, as if to dispel the memory of which he was reminded, he addressed the young Breton, as he was demolishing a rabbit pie:

"My young friend, do you mind telling us the occurrence during which you received a wound, and what was the cause of the swooning fit which came over the young lady?"

"Most willingly."

And Joel then related the adventure when the coach was stopped by the Colonel of Royal Marauders and his troop, with the result, but he was reserved as regarded his behaviour which earned the compliments of the two gentlemen of the audience.

When he had finished, M. de Boislaurier leaned towards his companion and asked:

"Do you not agree with me that this youth expresses himself most fitly and in a manner superior in all points to the peasants whose dress he has assumed?"

"Yes," responded the elder lord: "he is some younger son out of Brittany, most likely some farming gentleman, going to seek his fortune in the capital, with a good prospect of doing it, too, to my mind. A

good appearance, a well balanced tongue, coolness, and self-control——”

“ Well built, and——”

“ Plainly; built to stop millstones with his little finger, or to shoulder a boulder like a Titan——”

A cloud came over the face of Aramis: he leaned his elbow on the table, rested his chin on his hand, and mused. The aspect of the stout young squire, the memory he had himself invoked by his comparison—they brought back the image of Porthos, as his name alone had done. Not merely Porthos as he had seen him perish trying to uphold the immense mass of the rocks of Locmaria cavern after the explosion which the strong man had occasioned by hurling a keg of gunpowder among their pursuers, not the crushed giant—but the Porthos of the happy days of their feast of arms. Porthos, colossal musketeer, active, imposing, magnificent in his lifeguard uniform and the gold-embroidered baldrick which glittered like gold in the sunshine; Porthos the lady-killer who had courted “ My-Lady ” to provoke the proctor’s widow into wedding him and bestowing the wealth of her late lamented spouse upon him; the Porthos who fought so boldly and whose strength could make a hoop of an iron bar, and lift heavy weights as though they were feathers. And the Porthos, older but still sturdy, who won the admiration of the king at the royal table, as well as of the courtiers, by putting away lamb chops, pheasants and game patties.

But always the simple, fearless-hearted Porthos, true, smiling, invincible, disinterested, ready to lay down his life for others as though it was for that heaven had given him strength and riches: faithful to the motto of the four musketeers, he had fallen, crushed by an enormous rock, on the Breton beach where the breeze from the briny ocean waved the heather above his bones.

The repast of the two gentleman finished in silence,

for Aramis was thoughtful, and the other respected it. Little more talk went on at the other board, where all ate gluttonously. Was not Paquedru, who was feasting in the kitchen, likely at any moment to make his appearance to call out the traditional words: "All aboard, gentlemen! the delight of the innkeepers but the misery of famished travellers, still used by our railroad conductors at the stations.

"Have the horses harnessed," said the old duke to the host. "Do you not think we had better start—for you have accepted a seat in my carriage?"

His friend was of the same opinion. At this juncture, Bazin appeared upon the threshold to announce.

"Mdlle. du Tremblay desires to present her respects to the chevalier."

Following him entered Aurore, still pale and somewhat agitated. With a noble and graceful step she went towards M. d'Herblay.

"Monsieur," she said, "I have been told that you are about to depart, and I hope that you have not thought that I should see you go without thanking you from the bottom of my heart for the attentions I owe to you, and the care given to me without your knowing who I am."

The duke rose courteously to greet her.

"Dear lady," he replied, "I am too well repaid for services, of which you certainly enlarge the value by my satisfaction at seeing that they have been of some use. I suppose that you no longer suffer from your indisposition?"

"Thank heaven! and yourself."

"Oh, do not dwell upon that: it would vex me and I can crave a truce on account of the service rendered——"

"I will remain silent, then, since you wish it; but the gratitude which you check upon my lips, will return to my heart to be there preserved, fresh and sincere——"

Turning to the Breton squire, who was watching and listening to her as one would listen to a saint, she continued:

"The same as that I cherish for this young gentleman who defended and protected me."

This sentence fell like the charm of celestial music on the youth's ear. He longed to find some eloquent reply, but all that issued from his tremulous lips, from the breast brimful of delight, was this simple exclamation:

"It is I who thank you, lady!"

Whilst Aurore was speaking, Aramis was looking at her with marked attention, and becoming conscious of this, she felt ill at ease and curtseying again, she took a step in retreat; but the old lord retained her with a gesture.

"Permit me to ask one question—your name, which I but now heard, is far from being unknown to me. Are you any relation to the Marquis du Tremblay, who was governor of the Bastille prior to M. de Baise-meaux, and——"

"I am his niece, sir."

"An excellent gentleman, with whom I had a pleasant acquaintance—I mean, in the latter capacity—my visits to the Bastille not being in the capacity of his guest," proceeded Aramis with a singular smile which would be only comprehended by those who had been informed, as the readers of our "Man in the Iron Mask," of his interviews with the governor of that state prison of lugubrious memory. "By the bye, the marquis married a foreign lady, I believe?"

"A Hungarian, the widow of a judge of Pesth."

"Who brought him a large fortune as her marriage portion?"

"The consequence of which," replied Aurore, with a melancholy smile, "is the cause of my journey to Paris."

"In what way?"

"My grand-uncle died some eighteen months ago——"

"My poor, dear friend!"

"He died without issue and left no will; his wife had preceded him to the tomb, and his inheritance would have come without contest to my brother and sister and myself, as direct heirs, were it not disputed by two sons by the first marriage. They declared that their mother gave her second husband the property only for use during life, when it was to revert to her descendants in Hungary. This led to a law-suit, and I am proceeding to town to prosecute the claim, consult lawyers and solicit the judges."

"An arduous task."

"It cannot be helped. But do not believe, monsieur, that it is greed that moves me—it is hard necessity. My parents, whom heaven removed at a brief interval, left me nothing but an honourable name. Were I alone in the world, Heaven knows that I should be content with that; for penniless girls of noble birth, there is always the convent open——"

"Do not say that you would envelop your charms in such a dress."

The speaker had the air of not having heard the complimentary interjection, for she continued gravely and calmly:

"But I have the future of others to look after: my young brother's and sister's. They must be reared in a proper manner for their station of life. I did not hesitate, but collected our resources of which I made two parts: one, the least, luckily, was to defray my travelling expenses; that I was robbed of a while since; the other preserved to me by this gentleman's help"—she indicated Joel—"is intended to pay the children's board in the school where they will await the result of the case. Heaven grant that it will not be long coming, and will be favourable to us!"

"Mademoiselle," said the chevalier, "I am rich, and it would be according me a signal favour if——"

A flash darted from the full eyes, her brow bent, and all her loveliness assumed a bitter and fierce look.

"Sir," she retorted, in a tone animated by her wounded pride, "I trust that you are not going to offer me your purse?" But, instantly recovering herself, she softened her air, and said with emotion, "pardon me! I forgot what I owe to you, and poverty is so sensitive. I am not a beggar," she protested. "In Paris, I have an old kinswoman who will welcome me like her own child, and she will not refuse to share her all with me if necessary."

In the silence which ensued, Bazin's master assumed a paternal air.

"My dear young lady," he broke in by saying, "It is I who must beg pardon, if I have offended, un-awares, by an offer which my three-score and ten years should authorise me to make. I do not dwell on it. But if there be one thing which I have the right to offer you and you have the right to accept, from your being the head of the family, it is the support of all honourable men. Come, towards the success of this law-suit, do you know anybody in Paris? have you any relatives, protection, or influence there?"

Sadly the young litigant shook her head.

"Alas, my lord, this is the first time I have been to town, and I do not know a living soul there, save the old relative whom I have mentioned. The unfortunate have no friends. To triumph over my adversaries, I rely solely upon the righteousness of my cause and with the help of Heaven——"

"I, too, rely on such aids; nevertheless, had you more experience in life, you would know that all the decrees of justice are not always dictated by equity and right, but, more often, by means of engaging the powerful lawyers which pleaders know how to employ."

"The God of the fatherless have mercy on us then!"

"Well, I have some credit." M. de Boislaurier hid a faint smile. "Make use of me without scruples and restrictions. The Chevalier d'Herblay will be happy to serve you with all his zeal and all his power."

"But, really, how can I repay——"

"It is enough to see you, to be interested in you. By the way, here is M. de Boislaurier, whom I have the favour to present to you——" The gentleman and the young lady exchanged salutations. "I have no doubt that he agrees with me?"

"Yes," rejoined the other, "I am quite won by the lady."

"M. de Boislaurier is attached to the household of his Royal Highness the Dauphin, a pious Prince of austere manners," proceeded the chevalier; "when you speak to M. de Boislaurier, you speak to me. Besides," he added good-humouredly, "we do not attempt to force our services; you are perfectly free to decline them. Only, keep the children in mind, as you were just saying——"

"The carriage of my lord stops the way," reported the landlord.

At the same time the coachdriver's voice was heard outside shouting: "Passengers by the stage-coach take your seats!"

The ex-musketeer bowed to the young lady as he was wont to do to the queens when he was a gallant, and said:

"I trust we shall meet again, my child. My age permits me to give you this title. Remember that you are not without friends. Use them—too often rather than not at all, as the only means of proving to them that you are aware of the interest they take in you."

The movement to leave the room was general, and Joel took advantage of it to approach Aurore. She held out both hands to him with an outburst of gratitude, saying: "Wounded—you were wounded! and in

throwing yourself before me to save me from the shot aimed at me. Now, you must not be ill friends with me because I did not go and ask how you were at once," she went on with a forced familiarity; "but we are not going to part yet, you know, so that I shall have on the journey full leisure to overwhelm you with my thanks."

Meanwhile the chevalier was directing his steps to his carriage, on the arm of his friend.

"What do you think of that girl?" inquired the former.

"I think very highly of her," replied the gentleman, turning to have another look at the young lady, who was preparing to get into the coach, assisted by the radiant Joel.

His companion's smile was a reflection of that which had fascinated the Duchess de Chevreuse.

"Salute her with lowliness," said he, "as the rising star is saluted—as all the court will hail her before a great while; for the country lass, whose existence is not dreamt of by Paris and St. Germain, is the woman whom I have chosen to bring our projects to the desired end. She will succeed Montespan dethroned: she will be the future Queen of France—by the left hand—the hand on the heartside, remember—and, consequently, the real sovereign of France!"

CHAPTER VI

A RELIC FROM THE GIANT'S TOMB

WE will now go back to the period when Fouquet, the Lord High Treasurer in fact, of France, owned Belle-Isle-en-Mer. The estate is six leagues long by six in breadth, and it was a fief of the Retz family, to whom we owe the human monster who comes down to us

through the nursery as the original of "Bluebeard." It eventually passed into the financial superintendent's hands. It included three hamlets; Bangos, Saugen and Locmaria, the latter having some celebrity in the pretty ports of Brittany for the prettiness, gaiety and coquetry of its lasses.

The prettiest, and most promising of all the girls, but the least coquettish, was then Corentine Lebreu, god-daughter of Master Plouer, a sub-officer of the marines who had become connected with the guild of fishermen.

Corentine was eighteen years of age, and her tresses of deep yellow shone in the sunbeams like gold. She did not know what to do with them, they were so abundant about her shapely head. Her large, luminous eyes had smiles in them like those on her vermilion lips. Together with natural attractions, she was the best looking girl in the island. Her parents were hard-working, saving and intelligent working folk, who had toiled all their life that their only darling should be sheltered from care. They died at the task, but left her a nice farm that would sell well.

You may imagine how closely this prize was pursued by the young men, not only on the island, but along the coast. Quite a bevy followed at her heels when she went to sell the farm produce at the markets; she was so enticing in her hooded cloak and short plush petticoat, and with her rounded ankle disappearing in natty little shoes. The young men, too, formed a double row when she came out of church on Sunday, for then she wore a rich headdress, a gold cross, a velvet bodice worked with gold thread, checked stockings and silver buckles to her shoes. But she little troubled herself about sweethearts.

Her time was mostly taken up in attending to the farm and house matters, the harvest, the fowls, the stables, her almsgiving and her songs. Her life passed on, sweet and peaceful. Her limpid gaze was never

dimmed with tears. Around her shone a halo of glee. All who came near her were the happier for her beaming gladness.

About this time, M. Fouquet determined to fortify his Isle-in-the-Sea. Why? nobody exactly knew. It was his good pleasure, and his serfs asked no more. The Dukes of Burgundy no longer reined over the place, but the lords of the manor ruled in their stead. Superintendent Fouquet was the most powerful and wealthiest, and consequently the most popular of them all.

He employed an engineer and workmen. The former was a cavalier of high stature and robust mien, who wore a doublet laced with gold, and a hat covered with plumes. The females of Locmaria remarked his splendid appearance and his winning air.

Each evening the girl-farmer went to the churchyard where her parents lay, to see to the flowers on their graves and kneel in prayer.

It was on returning from this pious pilgrimage that Corentine was waylaid by a gang of drunken soldiers and stone-cutters, at nightfall. In a moment they surrounded her, and insisted on her sharing the bottle and joining in their gambols. In despair she screamed for help, though knowing that the new-comers, both working men and soldiers, inspired great terror in the islanders. A man ran up in strides like one on stilts; he knocked the revellers about like ninepins, and forced them to flee as much with his prowess as by his post of authority over them. It was the chief military engineer. He escorted her home, although he had so effectually driven molestation afar. The champion was not so much of a Parisian courtier as she took him to be, and with the same rustic frankness which she showed in recounting her name and position, he related that he was not what they took him for. He was, he said, but a Baron at present, but at the close of the honour of dining with the king, it was intimated that he might

look forward to be made a duke and peer of the realm. In fact, said the naïve Porthos, for our readers will have divined who this engineer was who felled men like puppets, his mission in Belle-Isle was not unconnected with the next step to his rising to the rank, for the fortification was on behalf of the monarch, who had no dearer friend than Fouquet.

The Baron du Vallon, we know, was a widower, and ever impressionable: the maid of the farm had never seen such a man, and they fell simultaneously in love.

They met again and again, and the love on Corentine's part was so pure, elevated into idolatry, and impressive, that the conqueror, who had perhaps no other defect than a too free tongue, never boasted of the conquest to Aramis; still less to D'Artagnan, who, since the far-reaching and fatal result of his false-play with "My Lady," was a model of discretion in gallantry.

When he last parted, Porthos had promised to come again. He never came. But the siege terminated by the island rebels surrendering to the royalists by command of their leader, the Bishop of Vannes. Corentine did not know that Porthos, (for she did not remember her lover by the titles which he held and which he said were due him,) had not shared the flight of his friend Aramis, but had been stayed by death on the beach of Locmaria.

There was one person who could have informed her how her beloved had perished. It was her god-father, Plouer, whom we have seen valiantly assisting the fugitives to leave the island. Unfortunately there was nobody whom the poor girl so persistently shunned as this man, for she had her shame and her sin to conceal from all—she was on the eve of becoming a mother.

She fled to the mainland, where she had an old relative living at Quimper. There she gave birth to a son. It was during her absence from home, and giving an excuse for it, that occurred the arrest of Fouquet, and

his transference to Pignerol Castle, and the occupation of the island by the king's troops. Only a confused account of these important events reached Corentine in her retreat. When she returned to the farm, she had lost her youthful smile, her cheek was pale, and her eyes had learnt how to weep. Nevertheless she was happy in a way, in her misfortune and her state of outcast. For her child remained by her—dear little Joel.

Corentine loved her child, to the point of delirious idolatry. In pagan times, comparing her lover with ordinary—nay, remarkable men, she would have believed that a demi-god had condescended to love her. In the baby Porthos, she worshipped the hero whom she had suddenly met and so mysteriously lost. She knew that she had been loved, and she believed that she still was loved by the handsome nobleman, whose manly bearing, showy uniform and plumed hat, had struck her with surprise and fascinated her. The conquest was still a mystery to her. She knew only enough of him to deplore the loss. She was not insensible to all that divided them—rank, birth and fortune. Would she ever behold him again? Of a certainty she wished to do so, and with all the ardour of her nature: but not now perhaps for her own sake—for the innocent creature who slumbered in its cradle, calm and rosy.

In bringing home this child to Locmaria, she had braved the local indignation. As soon as the excitement of the war, as they called the affair, had cooled down, the gossips took up the disgrace of the rich girl-farmer. How they did chatter to revenge themselves on her who had been so envied. How they overwhelmed the unmarried mother with brutal humiliation, coarse disdain, and artificial compassion, more cruel and humiliating still! How those whom she had jilted and the maids whom she had eclipsed affected to draw aside from her with disgust, tempered with sneering laughs and cutting remarks! The unhappy

girl endured all without complaint. Had she not her treasure to console her, in her solitude, for the scorn of the gross multitude? Its fresh lips called for the kiss, while the sweet breath of the infant was wafted through them.

During all this isolation of the public scorn, little Joel grew up. In time he became a youth of stature and strength far above the lads of his own age. The parish priest of Locmaria, good Father Keravel, had forgiven the sinning mother on seeing how she had redoubled her charity and with what affection she shielded her son, and he had consented to teach the youngster. He did teach him to read, write and cipher. And a smattering of spelling and a little Latin; but the highest nobles no longer emulated Fouquet in "living up" to the court of poets and men of letters which he had fostered. But it was undoubted that the young Porthos mounted the wildest of the island ponies bare-backed, so that he had won the fame of being a centaur; that he could run down a hare on his own feet and could take the eggs from the highest nest. And lastly, he could fire off a musket with as good a success as old Plouer, who had won the reputation of killing nineteen woodcock out of twenty.

We hasten to say that the old marine had not imitated the virtuous Locmarians by turning his back on his erring god-daughter. Old soldiers are usually free in matters of love. In his presence nobody dared to speak a word against the pretty farmer-girl.

Plouer was not only a daring mariner and a successful fisher on the island, but he had been one of the best fencers in his regiment. He could swing a cutlass now so that not one dare stand up to him, steel in hand.

He was so fond of the art, without which no gentleman was reckoned accomplished in that era, that he put a little sword in the chubby hand of Joel when he was only six years old.

From that time, the boy never let a day pass without having a lesson with his tutor in sword exercise for an hour or two. In the course of this amusement, the enlarged knitting-needle had become a cook's skewer, and finally a long rapier, while the unsteady hand was at length firm, the eye sure and piercing, and the strippling was able to stand up all the day, in the position taught in the fencing schools of the time.

Apart from these advantages, our hero possessed at his sixteenth year a height scarcely below six feet in his stockings, and he promised not to stop there; a fist that could smash paving stones, a digestion that could relish them; and an inexhaustible fount of good spirits.

His mother worshipped her infant Hercules, and he returned her love with interest.

He wanted for nothing. He had the finest broadcloth suits, the choicest hunting dogs, a fowling piece made by the first gunsmith of Nantes, and enough pocket-money to shower alms on the poor. On returning from the chase he always found a copious repast, and the thickest feather bed awaiting him for a good twelve hours' sleep.

But it is not always such happiness which conduces to good results. A great event was to put an end to it.

One day, a beggar whom he had often relieved and who used sometimes to attend him in his hunting expeditions, was set upon by some fellows who came out of a wine-shop, and not observing that the son of Porthos was within hearing, pelted him with stones and hurled at him the reproach that he could find no better post than to be the hanger-on of a pert knave who could not tell who his father was.

The ringleader of these ruffians was a youth who had pretensions to gentle blood, his father having been a prominent official under the rule of Fouquet. Upon the insulted young man showing himself and scatter-

ing the brawlers by his presence alone, this one stood firm but refused reparation.

"I cannot fight with a man who is beneath me," he said. "I am a gentleman!—if you are born to carry a sword, go get it with proofs of your right to bear it, and I will meet you on the beach by the Giant's Tomb."

The crowd supported the challenger in this ingenious evasion, for nobody believed in the cloudy story of Corentine's amour, which had oozed out from Plouer in his cups.

In a fit of passion and desperation, Joel had run off at random, and woe to any one whom he encountered in that mad race.

Without being aware of it, his steps brought him to the spot in the desert which the young gentleman had selected for the duel which he did not expect to have to fight.

The Giant's Tomb was a moss and weed-grown mound about which the superstitious Bretons had woven the usual garland of legends. Here, in plain truth, had been immured Porthos in defending his friend Aramis and to give him the time to escape in the boat which Plouer and his crew were to launch and direct to avoid the royal fleet blockading Belle-Isle. But the secret had been well-kept by the dead soldiers whom they had destroyed and the fishermen who had conveyed the fugitive Bishop of Vannes to the frigate which carried him to Spain. Plouer was observed to laugh with the low chuckle of the Breton when he heard a villager express his dislike to go along the strand by what had been the cavern of Locmaria.

Corentine, who had also discovered the grotto, and had imparted the word to her god-father, had also kept the secret. Thus it transpired that the rustics went back to the olden times for a cause to account for the convulsion which had buried the pursuers of the Bishop of Vannes and his companion in the grotto. They in-

vented a giant who had been at war with the priests who tenanted the spot as custodians of a temple, and who had been defeated by the holy men. Ages after, when the enemies of the good bishop invaded the holy site, the giant's spectre, enraged at the profanation of his resting-place, had upheaved the rocks and let all tumble in upon the royalists.

When the excited youth reached this mound, the sun was shining brightly and the gulls flew close up and screamed at him as he took a seat sadly among the melancholy larches which twisted like dead serpents among the stones; some of these showed the blue and black marks of the explosion. In certain places a rank grass grew, and in others, only a creeping weed with a blood-red flower like splashes of gore.

At the spot where Joel sat, the upheaval seemed one of the funeral mounds raised by the ancients after a battle where a few determined spirits had annihilated a host. It is true that Aramis and Porthos between them, with the slight assistance of Plouer and his crew of two, had slain over a hundred of their enemies.

All around was peace; but here the spirit of battle still reigned supreme and roused the ire of the youth. He thought only of killing every one of the bitter jesters who had insulted his mother and his father's memory. He would attack the slanderers a hundred strong, and strike, and slay, and slay with an unwearied arm. This father whom he had never seen and of whom he thought so constantly but spoke so seldom—who was he? Piously the youth invoked this sire who was but a phantom in his dreams. And it seemed to him, on the sombre background of the pines and blackened rocks, that he suddenly beheld one of those human-like figures moulded by the action of the ocean mists. This figure had the martial being of a conqueror of men, and it seemed as though the large eyes were bent on him with a glance of blended sorrow and pride. With a noble gesture it drew a long sword

from its rich girdle-band, and with a flourish as if to indicate its purpose, placed it on a stone not a score of feet away. Then, with a kind of farewell nod, it vanished into the other mists which began to wreath the mound.

Breaking the spell which had held him during this vision, Joel sprang to his feet with a wild cry: "Oh, stay, my father!" but when he reached the stone, all had gone and, indeed, no weapon of any kind rested on the face of granite—only a dry twig with which imagination had pictured the sword.

But still Joel did not take his eyes from where the apparition had withdrawn from his sight: never had a dream been so vivid—he believed that he should never forget the form in its details, plumed hat, with some of the feathers snapped by bullets, glittering baldrick, loose breeches seamed with gold lace and disappearing in the large tops of riding boots. But to his call only the sea-bird's shrill scream had answered. He turned reluctantly, when a sharp pain at his heel wrung from him an exclamation. Something bright but ruddy gleamed in the sunshine; he stopped and carefully examined what proved to be a point of metal. He seized the twig and dug it out—it was a sword, but from its length and weight and the size of the handle it must have belonged to such a giant as was fabled to lay his bones here.

"It is my father's own gift," said Joel, kissing it piously, although the rust reddened his pale lips. "I accept the token and I hope to draw it only in such causes as he would approve and never to sheathe it until I have revenged the wrong done me."

He had the weapon for redress, and now, all that was wanting was the proof of his right to live. He returned home, and entered the house, still pale, but his eyes blazing and his features sternly contracted. Never had his mother seen the usually placid youth so aroused.

"Good heavens, what has happened?"

"I have been insulted," responded Joel, in a deep and tremulous voice; "and I am to meet the principal aggressor in a duel, when I am supplied with the name of my father and the proof that he was entitled to confer on his son the right to bear and use a sword. This sword—his sword—you see, I am provided with."

And he related the vision and held up the sword of Porthos which time, the action of the sea breeze and the crumbling of the stones, had fortuitously offered to his hand.

Corentine turned pale on seeing the sword, heroic in dimensions, which she recognised as having been worn by her colossal lover. She staggered, pressing her hand to her bosom as though she had been pierced to the heart with it. Joel loved his mother and felt a respect for her which would not have been unworthy a saint. On seeing the distress which came over the unhappy woman, sudden revulsion drove away his wrath as regarded her. He bent his knee as one does in suing great pardon, and exclaimed with a pang of anguish:

"What is the matter, mother? Have I offended you? Surely you do not recognise this sword?"

"Yes," she returned solemnly, and staying her tears; "Well, you shall know now what you will be sure to learn later on. I first met——"

He held up his hand to silence her, with a kind of authority which he had never felt or shown to her before.

"Nay, be still. I do not wish to know anything. I will not fight a duel with this impudent boy, but cudgel him and his band of jesters within an inch of their lives. Do not speak—unless to utter my forgiveness for having caused you pain."

She disengaged herself from his embrace, and repeated:

"You shall know, my boy, what it is right you

should have known; but for a little while let it remain a secret."

"Oh, mother, I have no wish but yours. Keep the secret. Like the vision and the gift of my sire, it will be revealed in God's own good time."

"I pledge you my faith that all shall be clear," she went on gravely. "If you have seen him—dead—it is because I am to see him soon. You shall know all, all—when—" she muttered the end of the sentence out of his hearing: "when death shall prevent me blushing in your presence."

From that moment, there was a change in the life of the mother and the son. She grew gloomy, and her activity waned. She left to him the care of the farm, and shut herself up in her room. She was often heard to repeat with the set frown of one haunted by the same idea: "It is by my son's hand that I am punished."

She had long ceased to go to the churchyard to decorate her parents' grave, for the slanderers would even now have insulted her; in country places, moral feuds rarely die out; but she took her only walks to the deserted tract of the beach where rounded up the Giant's Tomb. Nobody but Joel, whose curiosity had urged him to follow her one day, divined the object of this strange pilgrimage.

"I am certain it was my father whom I saw, as surely as this sword was his." And he smiled with a kind of savage and lofty pride that he was the offspring of so grand and impressive a figure.

Meantime the poor woman's face grew thin; around her eyes brown circles formed; her skin assumed the yellow of old ivory and threads of silver whitened her luxuriant hair. Her son was almost the only one not to remark the alteration, for his mother was always the same to him.

Yet he was serious at times. He had not resented the insult either with the providentially supplied sword or with the cudgel, but this was because nobody dared

repeat the slur on his parentage, in his hearing, from the terribly threatening look which he wore when he suspected it was on the lips of any one. A jest loses its virtue when there is danger of no less than death to the joker. No one believed that he had forgotten the insult, least of all the young squire who had uttered it. Joel's natural liveliness was often veiled by a cloud of care. His eyes wandered into space and became fixed so that the old crones said that the young master at Corentine's farm had "seen the walkers on the heath," meaning those envoys from the other world who tell us of what it is not possible for mortals to hear without their being made miserable for life. He would walk the beach for hours together, as if an invisible attraction linked his sight with some spot on the other side of the water separating him from the main.

The farm proprietress read what was passing within him; for she would meet him on his coming home, and say in a broken voice as she pressed him to her bosom: "But you will not go away, my darling, until I am no more?"

The malady under which Corentine suffered was the most undermining of all: it was grief. She was certain that her gallant lover was in the grave, and the sword which pointed to heaven from the subterranean vault was a token. She questioned Plouer in secret, while Joel was out of the house, and he described the companion of the Bishop of Vannes, distinguished his tall form and imposing demeanour so that there was no doubt left that the father of the boy was he whom they were both fond of, the engineer who had defied the king and his forces, though the soldier had never heard him called by any other name than "Porthos," but he had no more doubt than his god-daughter, of the nobility of the officer. Unfortunately, the Bishop of Vannes had fled as an outlaw. In this remote spot, no one knew how the king had forgiven him, on the instance of his favourite captain of the musketeers. That

Aramis, escaped by his affiliation to the Order of Jesus, should have attained high rank in Spain, did not enter into the fancy of either of these rustics. They both believed that the secret was buried in the Giant's Grave. The syndic of the fishermen went there, and tried to unearth the bones of the valiant one; but the immense boulders defied his single hand to even loosen them; and as he did not wish strangers to disinter the remains, he forbore to call in aid.

He returned to tell of his non-success to his god-daughter, whom he had not seen for some days, and met a messenger who was running to the priest's. Corentine was in bed and very unwell; her ailment was mental and the physican for the soul alone might do her any good.

As the messenger was an infirm old man, Plouer replaced him in the quest.

In the meanwhile, Joel had gone into the sick-room at his mother's feeble call. She was sitting up, after an effort which drew from her a piteous cry. He hastened to wipe off the tears which the pain wrung from her failing eyes. He had crossed the room to reach her in a couple of strides, like a lion. But he had not made more noise than the same animal hunting for prey. He threw himself on his knees by the bedside, and pressed his burning lips on the woman's bloodless and wasted hands. She drew him passionately towards her.

"When you are by me, I do not suffer," she murmured. "You must not upset yourself," she continued, with gentle gravity, on feeling the boy's tears on her face—for he was ever a boy to her; "we are not to part for ever, but shall meet again where my prayers and my repentance will have won me a place, I trust. In that home of peace and bliss, I shall watch over your days. You will see me bending over you, as when you were in the cradle, and the belief of my guard will support you in the task which I entreat our Lord to grant you the power to fulfil."

"Your father assured me—and a nobleman never lies to the woman whom he adores—that he never loved any other but me—that he had no heir to his fortune, his title and his fame. It is you who must show that his spirit lives in his son. Find out who he was—for I feel that he is not in the land of the living, alas! That is the reason why I reveal to you the secret of my life, my loss of station among the neighbours and this killing grief. It is my duty to acknowledge my fault——"

"Mother," said the young man, "again, let me know nothing. Speak not a word, or tell me that this is not the long farewell."

She thanked him with a look full of love and gratitude.

"You have never so much as questioned me by a look, since the once. God will bless the son who so respected his mother. Nevertheless, you have been seeking the origin of your birth. Do not deny what I and Plouer have perceived. Besides, you know not how to lie."

Joel raised his head with pride.

"The reverend father is coming," she resumed. "No doubt he will approve of my course, and then you will know all as far as I do."

She stopped to listen to a sound which did not catch his ears, and sank back exhausted on the pillow. He leant over her and he received that inimitable caress—the dying mother's final salutation this side of the grave. Without, he now heard the tinkling of a small bell; it was the priest coming, guided by Plouer.

Indeed Father Keravel approved of the woman's wishes, for he remitted to Joel, next day, that of Corentine's death, the written confession which she wished her son to peruse in his search for his paternity, clues to help him, a portrait traced from an unflagging memory, some names and a date. She had yielded up these when the hour of her liberation from grief and

pain came to her. Some days after the funeral of one whom he long and sincerely mourned the young master of the farm announced his intention to sell it and all its belongings. But the matter was not arranged without delay, the cunning peasants pretending to be in no hurry to purchase what they were in reality coveting. The formalities lasted about a year, in the course of which the young heir gradually fell back into his old habits and moods.

One day he called upon Father Keravel, and after having begged him to forgive him for the trouble he had caused him as the "Big boy," of the school, and thanked him for what amount of education he had succeeded in imparting, he constrained him to accept a sum of money for his school and the little chapel.

"Holy father," he said, "I ask to be remembered in your prayers as I am going to Paris."

"Yes, my son," answered the priest. "I know the aim to which you tend, and I am not the one to turn you aside, however difficult the task appears. It is a laudable errand, and you are a worthy young gentleman. The Lord will protect you, and I shall bless you."

Our hero then took leave of Plouer. At the first words which touched upon the imminent departure, the old soldier muttered:

"Humph! it is my opinion that you are going to look for a needle in a haystack. But I am not going to quarrel with you, though. Why, to my mind it is here you should take up one end of the clue. However, do your best to unravel the mystery."

After giving his somewhat perverted advice, the old sub-officer added:

"I see you have girded on the sword you found, and you still believe as I do, that it belonged to the engineer who fought the king's men single-handed, or nearly so—for though I admit that the bishop saw the blood spilled, like an old warrior—as they tell me

once he was—the fighting fell nearly all to M. Porthos's lot." And for the first time, in its entirety, he related the scene in the grotto, where the royalists had been held at bay by the paltry force of the two friends and the three fishers. Joel listened with avidity, and his eyes sparkled. This was a father worthy of having. But it was the proofs of that parentage that he could alone hope to find—he was sure that he was turning his back in that search, on his sire's grave. At least, he left the admiring Plouer to guard it.

"Let me see the sword again," said the old corporal, and he reverently handled the long weapon. "That is it, I am sure. I see the motto on the blade is 'One for All, All for One'—a very good one for the member of a regiment. There is a Spanish one often seen on good Toledo blades—'Never draw me without reason or sheathe me but in honour.'"

Hugging the recipient of his fencing knowledge, as if to crush him, he concluded:

"Hang these fondlings, which are only fit for women! Farewell, and may your journey then turn out well, my boy. Think sometimes of your old fencing-master and keep in practice for the ward, and the lunge, cultivate the *prime parade* and when you thrust, do it with your whole arm, body and soul. Perfection can reach any point."

CHAPTER VII

AT THE THRESHOLD

It was to Mdlle. du Tremblay our hero imparted as much of this romantic story as he knew, and he concluded succinctly:

"The court is at Paris or in its neighbourhood, and the place of all noblemen is at the court. Now, it is

clear that my father was a nobleman, and if he be alive, or if he has friends in position, I shall learn something of him. Hence I am making straight for Paris."

The young lady could not abstain from a start of surprise and compassion before such simple faith.

"But the clues of which you speak—the date—and the names to aid you in your search?"

"The starting-point is the date of the occupation of Belle-Isle by the royal forces. The first of the names is that of my father, 'Porthos,' next those of his three companions-in-arms, for whom he cherished an attachment and devotion above proof—these were Athos, Aramis, and D'Artagnan."

Aurore shook her head, and commented:

"Singular names, indeed, and no doubt cloaks to their real ones. What a mystery to unravel!" And she gravely added: "I hope you will succeed."

He looked at her with affright.

"Oh, lady, you do not give me much encouragement. You will dishearten me."

"My friend, you have a helper, and it can do everything for those who trust to it——"

"It?" said Joel sadly: "I understand: you mean chance?"

"Well, I prefer to call it Providence," replied the girl with inspiration.

This conversation took place on the rich plains of Beauce; for time had progressed, as well as the coach, and the acquaintance of the young couple, commenced on the highway of Saumur, was complete on the day after their leaving the "Golden Heron."

The night following the departure had been spent by the young squire in watching over the sleep of the lady; she sat over against him, while he shrank back into a corner of the cumbrous vehicle, where all the passengers were huddled together.

When a dawning light had peeped in, he had seen

the girl's entrancing features gradually become defined, from being vague and smoothed out as in a vision, so as to be still more captivating as they could be more clearly distinguished. The rising sun played with her tresses. As soon as she opened her eyes, their gaze met the youth's, and a rosy tinge suddenly coloured her peachy cheeks. In the limpid pupil was a slight reproach as she said to the admirer:

"So you were looking at me sleeping, Joel?"

He, too, had blushed like a boy, and he was confused and could not find a reply. Lifting his hand to his forehead, to collect his wits, he disarranged the bandage with which his face-wound had been covered during the night. As he was trying to invent some excuse, to give himself countenance, Aurore asked if she might not help him. And, without waiting for his consent, she proceeded to refasten the bandage with a steady hand.

Our Breton adventurer wanted speech to express his ecstasy, but his ravished gaze was terribly eloquent.

"I am only doing my duty," continued the fair Samaritan. "This was caused through me. I thank heaven the hurt is so slight, when it might in such a place have been mortal."

"It would have been a joy to have shed all my life's blood on your behalf," muttered the youth.

"Do I pain you?" inquired Aurore, smiling.

"Oh, do not think of such a thing!" exclaimed the squire, whose intoxication knew no bounds.

The bandage having been adjusted she went on to say: "I have spoken of a duty which it is sweet to fulfil; but I have also a right, and it is my desire; I want to know who it is to whom I must be ever grateful for so signal a service."

Thereupon the young man had related the story of his life, until his listener, lifting a warning finger, indicated that their fellow-travellers were also listening, with ears pricked up and mouths agape.

"Finish the rest by-and-by—when we are going up a hill."

This was the only means of having seclusion from their coach-companions. So, when a rising of the road obliged the party to alight and relieve the vehicle of their bodies, Mdle. du Tremblay—whom her presumed lightness and her sex had excused from this change,—which the shipping merchant facetiously styled "unloading ship"—hastened to step down. The least acclivity tempted her. Encouraged by a smile, Joel offered her his arm, and the two walked on together, leaning towards one another. In these instants of isolation the orphan had concluded his narration. On her part, she repeated what she had told the Chevalier d'Herblay. After this exchange of confidence, the two chatted. Of what? it little matters. No doubt of the weather, the scenery, continually varying, the villages they drove through without noticing them, and those trifles, "light as air," which lovers find full of sense when the adored one speaks of them. Their glances were caresses, their words incense, and their hearts beat time. — *Love—what it is. — A.K.A.*

On the heights on St. Cloud, Paquedru pointed with his whip to the twin towers of the Cathedral of Nôtre Dame, emerging on the horizon in the floating gold dust of a fine summer's evening.

"Paris!" he shouted.

"The Capital!" repeated the others, rubbing their hands with satisfaction at having had no more adventures with highwaymen.

"Paris!" repeated with mutual sadness the Son of Porthos and the daughter of the house of Tremblay.

For the rest, the driver's hail had been a proclamation, impatiently awaited, of the end of their imprisonment in this cage on wheels, rolling at a slow pace. For our pair of turtle doves, it simply meant a parting. Their bosoms shrank, their brows clouded and their lips became mute.

Meantime the coach entered the city to stop in the courtyard, the name still being applied to the site, though built upon in the suburbs, without the St. Honore gate.

The passengers hastened to open the door and climbed out with a sigh of relief.

"Is Mdlle. du Tremblay here?" inquired a quavering voice, as an aged serving-woman showed herself at the coach-door.

"Here am I," responded the girl, leaping out nimbly.

The old domestic curtseyed, and continued: "Your kinswoman, my mistress, Widow de la Bassettiere, sent me to meet you and take you to our house."

"Very well, nurse; I am quite ready." But she turned towards the Breton, who had alighted after her from being in the farther corner, and said: "It is time to part."

His heart was swollen with anguish, and he could not utter a word.

"Good fortune," she said, offering her hand. "And I hope we may meet again."

"Do you?" queried Joel, feeling life return to him at the sentence.

"Certainly," in full sincerity: "It is only mountains that never meet," she added, forcing herself to seem mirthful to cheer him. "I feel sure that we shall meet again."

"But how, when, or where?" questioned the Breton, who had learnt from his fencing-master to reply directly and to the point.

Aurore replied promptly; "The member of my family offering me hospitality lives in the Rue des Tournelles, in the neighbourhood of the Palais Royal. Every evening, for the vespers, I shall go to the church of St. Paul."

While the young couple were arranging their next meeting, two men in cloaks, with their hats slouched

over their eyes, were hiding under the shed over a shop-front. When the young lady and the old servant went their way towards St. Honore gate, one of the men leaned to the other and said in the Spanish language, in his ear:

"Did you notice those two women?"

"Yes, my lord duke."

"Then follow them, taking heed not to let them perceive that they are the object of your pursuit."

"I understand."

"Bring to me the name of the street and description of the house where their journey leaves them."

"It shall be done, my lord." And the Duke of Almada's trusted myrmidons started off in the track of the unsuspecting pair with a stealthy step and wary carriage which showed that the errand was not a new one.

CHAPTER VIII

THE ARISTOCRATIC FORTUNE-TELLER

ON the day when the Nantes coach arrived in Paris, three women came to a stop before a house in the middle of the Rue du Bouloi. They wore muslin caps with a point, and hooded mantles of the middle-class. The house had such a mysterious appearance as became one reputed to be the retreat of the heiress, some said the daughter, of La Voisin, the prisoner who cloaked her deadly trade under that of soothsaying. Whoever she was she called herself the Manicarde, which meant, if anything, the Fortune-teller. It was still the fashion to believe in witches, who sold pomades to ladies to make thin persons stout, and stout ones slender, charms to cause the unimpressible to love one another. The queen and the king's brother had even come to consult the oracles, it was asserted.

As the executed La Voisin's daughter, the prophetess had learnt something by her fate, for she declared that she only told fortunes and did not deal in cosmetics or elixirs of love or, still less, deadly drugs. Thanks to this rule, the Lieutenant of Police, Lareynie, allowed her undisturbedly to pursue her craft in the same street as where he lived, and indeed could count from his house the number of customers she had.

At the knock struck on the door by one of the women, a negro boy, dressed in the oriental costume, silently opened it and conducted the three visitors into a large parlour on the ground floor where he pointed to chairs.

The rooms resembled an alchemist's laboratory, the hanging lamp showing stuffed crocodiles, owls, alembics, and the traditional paraphernalia of the wizard, covered with dust. On the other hand, the chairs which the visitors took were clean as if frequently used. They looked about them with curiosity, and one whispered, with a slight shivering:

"Does it not seem to you that these tapestry hangings harbour a host of muttering spectres? Do you not believe that the wiches' Sabbath is celebrated here? Really, ladies I am afraid."

"A meeting of witches within a couple of steps of the royal palace and the public gardens—next door to the residence of the head of the police! you must be mad, my dear friend!" With boastfulness she added: "I laugh at the whole pack." Turning to the third of the party, she inquired: "What are you doing, dear Françoise?"

"I am contemplating," replied this one tranquilly.

While the first lady shudders in dread, the second laughs, and the last observes, let us present all three to the reader, two of them being called upon to play important parts in this work.

The one in terror was small, fresh in complexion, inclined to be full in figure, with chestnut hair, lively

eyes and mocking mouth. She is not of much importance to us.

Not so with the laughing beauty: her haughty manners, imperial stature, and lofty mien formed a striking contrast with the modesty of her dress. She appeared of middle age, but her loveliness was still "interesting," as her contemporaries termed it. An abundance of hair, of a ruddy light colour, puffed out her cap. Only the slightest space separated brows of jet, seeming to be drawn with a brush, and her imperious coral lip was curled with a proud smile beneath a nose finely chiselled with nostrils inflated with passion. Still, the masculine and regular countenance wore an expression of unrest. The eye was cold and hard; the smile often perfidious and ironical; and the prominent cheekbones betrayed fierce obstinacy.

The third visitor would have been more attractive but for her severe and thoughtful mien. Her countenance, without being pretty, possessed an invincible charm for its expression of meditative calm and resolution. Her complexion, of the warm cream tint in colonial beauties, set off the black orb which seemed pursuing some dream flown into vacancy, and when she raised them upon persons, they were scrutinised with deep and comprehensive fixedness. Curls of brown hair clustered on the forehead, bright and smooth, where the work of thought was plain. Lastly, she had the rare and valuable boon of features which once seen could never be forgotten, although no one of them struck attention.

Suddenly a door opened, and the Manicarde appeared. Her patrons were kept in ignorance of her age, as she gave her audiences *seances*, as they would be called in the modern jargon of her tribe, in a dark-coloured, ample dressing gown with hood and cape, pulled down over the eyes for which there were holes cut; they sparkled with a lustre which might be youth.

For a moment she regarded the three ladies, who had risen on her approach.

"How do you do, ladies," she said in a grave voice.

"Ladies," was a significant term with her, as it was used at the period towards all women of quality.

"In you I hail Birth, Beauty and Rank!" she proceeded after a pause. "I hail Fortune which is going to offer its most amazing boon in making one of you a queen."

"A queen? Am I to be a queen?" exclaimed the tall, fair woman, stepping forward as though such a prediction could apply to her alone, but the sooth-sayer did not take up the direct challenge.

"Is it you who wish to be the first to question Fate?" she said.

"Yes," returned the other, "provided that there is no obstacle."

La Voisin nodded affirmatively.

"You are quite right, inasmuch as your present position gives you the right to take precedence of all womankind. Follow me, therefore, into the study where I am accustomed to receive persons of your quality."

Behind the screen, she had a private room without the hideous and horrifying objects, toads, serpents, magic books, etc., intended to impress the vulgar. On a table was only a pack of cards and a witch-hazel rod. Near the table was a large arm-chair.

"My lady the marchioness," said the sybil, standing and speaking with marked deference, "do me the honour to take a seat."

"How do you know my title?" exclaimed the other with surprise.

As plainly as I know the name of the high and mighty Dame Athenais de——"

"Oh!" quickly interrupted the visitor, "do not utter that name, if you please. Walls have ears sometimes, and I did myself quite too much harm, as no

doubt you know, by going to consult La Voisin unmasked and without disguise."

"La Voisin was foolish enough to vend the drug that cleared one's way to inheritance—the power of *Succession*," dryly replied the witch, "while I sell nothing but horoscopes. However, I will call you the Marvel, if you like, as you are styled in the circle where you shine with peerless lustre. Now, will you deign to show me your hand?"

The marchioness was satisfied with this arrangement, for she tucked up the sleeve of her robe, and held out to the speaker a hand which might have come from an ancient statue of Cybele; in his happiest inspiration Phidias never sculptured one purer and so perfect.

"Yes," murmured the fortune-teller, attentively examining the lines, "it is noble and severe, although graceful in shape and pretty. Albeit delicate, it is larger than usual, which denotes a mind decisive, and capable of bold deeds. This hand is fit to wield a sceptre!"

The lady listened with a thrill of pleasure, while the other continued: "By these lines I can tell that you were born in 1641, and are consequently thirty-seven years of age——"

"Pass that!"

"You come of a family in which mental capacity is largely developed. You were maid of honour to the queen. In 1663, I believe, you were married; but your husband left you, and your children have no right to bear his name."

"My good woman," interrupted the Marchioness de Montespan with impatience, "I am not asking you for what I know better than yourself. What I want to know is—shall I be Queen of France?"

The diviner rolled her eyes heavenward as though to consult a higher power, before she answered:

"You are even now what you wish to be."

Frowning, the other said in a lower tone: "But there is yet an obstacle."

"It will be removed."

"What? Queen Maria Theresa——"

"Her days are numbered, and death awaits her." She shuffled the cards and as she spoke threw one down, face up, on the table: it was the seven of clubs. "So many years as there are points here."

"Are you certain?"

"The cards never lie," returned the Manicarde, pointing to the pack with a slender finger which might have been an old woman's emaciated with age, or a girl's not yet developed.

"Ah!" replied the other as she drew her hand away, saying:

"Enough! You need read no farther. If your prediction comes to pass, your fortune is made. Meanwhile, take this purse."

She threw a heavy one on the board.

"If only the throne be empty, rely on me taking and holding it."

But the sybil shook her head, and said:

"Lady, lady, you have not yet attained your mark. Did you not see that wand move?"

"What wand?"

"My rod which bent over to touch the cards."

"No, I did not notice it. What would it signify?"

"That there is an obstacle in your path."

"Never mind; I shall overcome it."

"Does the fiery charioteer perceive the rut in which his steed hurls all to ruin? See—the wand continues to vibrate—Lady, lady, have a care!"

Without any apparent reason, the rod of wood shook as if about to turn into a living snake.

"Why should I care?"

"Mistrust everybody: those nearest you in the first place."

"My poor witch, you are too good," said La

Montespan, with a smile. "I always take those precautions against those nearest me. Ask my son, though he is only eight years old, and my sister, Mdme. de Thianges. Still, if you would be a little more definite?"

"Harm comes from a woman whom you will have reared. Beware of disgrace through a woman-friend."

The hearer reflected for a while; then she rejoined with dark and threatening energy:

"Thanks for the warning. I shall remember it. But who will dare, in the court of France, dispute with me the inheritance of that wretch Fontanges? Those who will rob me of my royal lover know too well that I am not a La Vallière, and that there is but one Athenias de Morte. For all others, the royal couch will be a death-bed!"

The lady with the pale complexion and fair curls replaced the first client in the diviner's study a few minutes after. The prophetess bowed to her with tokens of the deepest respect. She refused the hand which was held out to her.

"I do not need it to raise a corner of the veil over the future. It is sufficient for me to look upon your face where I see the traces of fears but lately there. For you have suffered—sickness, poverty and humiliations."

"Yes," said the other with bitterness.

"When but a child, your parents were driven from the land of their birth to one across the sea. You fell into a trance on the voyage so like death, that the ship's doctor ordered you to be thrown overboard, but in embracing you for the last time, your mother felt your heart throb lightly, and you were taken back to the cabin, where you opened your eyes."

"Quite true—my mother saved me."

"Two years after, when you were drinking milk on the grass, a deadly snake approached you and your mother had barely time to catch you by the hand and

snatch you away; but the snake did not pursue you—it stopped to drink the milk.”

“That is true: but why revive these memories?”

“Merely to prove that Providence has never ceased to watch over you.”

“Why should He abandon one who has never ceased to trust in His mercifulness?”

“Fate ruled that you, young and charming, should be wedded to an old invalid who bequeathed you the pension which had helped him to subsist, but which you long sued for until recently——”

“When the munificence of his majesty restored it to us.”

“You may marry again,” suggested the fortune-teller.

“What! who would have me?” questioned the young widow disconsolately. “I am not a girl, and I am poor.”

“Still,” said the soothsayer, “you will marry for the second time, and he who will select you to be linked with him in glorious destiny, will have none above him save the King of Heaven.”

“What do you say?”

“I tell you that the lower your starting-point, the higher you will soar. The goal will not be reached by the proud woman who took the lead of you just now—never will she mount to the rank where her unscrupulous ambition entices her. Your fortune will astound the world and history.”

“For heaven’s sake,” whispered the questioner, “speak lower! Were you to be heard——”

The look of brightness in her eyes faded as quickly as it had been kindled, and with apparent calmness, she resumed: “But no, this is a trick of your craft: or you are jesting! in such language how can anything serious exist?”

“But, this is not the first time your ears have been thrilled with such a promise. Did not the mason

Barbré, one day, in the Albert mansion, on seeing you, burst out with this prophecy: 'Behold one who will achieve to greatness over the thorny path?' The truth of heaven may issue from the lowliest lips. To the least, worthy may be revealed the secret of its impenetrable will. I tell you that your troubles are well-nigh ended. You will be guided out of your gloom by a ray from the crown of France, in the same way as your mother's smile called you out of the cloud of death. Adversity will flee from you like the snake that threatened your life. A great monarch will love you, and make you his wife—you will be a queen."

She ceased speaking as if worn out, and raised her eyes to the ceiling as an actress glances towards the prompter, for instruction.

By a great effort of self-command the hearer calmed herself, and closed her eyes as though the dazzling visions had been too much for her: thanks to this temporary abstraction, she did not perceive the passing sight of a face with blue eyes and red hair which appeared at a trap-door in the ceiling, and replied to the soothsayer's steadfast look with a smile. At this moment the door tapestry was lifted, and the third visitor showed her head. She also held a purse and she said, in a pleading voice:

"Dear, dear, am I never to have my turn and a share in the good things on fate's table?"

But the fortune-teller was making a low reverence to the future Queen of France, and respectfully said:

"Only when you have the means and the power; be good to the brave poor, as on the whole the world has been to you who bear your poverty so bravely."

"Ah," said the intruder, advancing a little, "I did the honour to ask if you——"

"Madame," replied the witch, "I have only this to tell you. Albeit you are the Lady of Heudicourt, and a niece of a marshal of France, you will not the

less be expelled from the court on account of your spiteful tongue."

The surprised woman crushed up in her hand the purse, and hastened to withdraw with her two companions.

The outer door had hardly closed on them before the soothsayer, who had sunk on the large chair, was joined by the owner of the fair face with red hair who had peeped through the sliding panel in the ceiling. This familiar, who had no doubt whispered to his *voice* the cues for her foretelling, was a man of good appearance, except for his eyes being watery and having drooping lids. With such eyes he must be a skilful, hardened, perfidious knave. He was the individual distinguished in the examination of the culprits of a great poisoning case as "the Englishman," or "the wool-merchant," he being neither in fact. He was the leading spirit of the band, and, like most ring-leaders, had escaped, where his tools suffered.

"Well, did I acquit myself well?" queried the woman, throwing back the cowl and revealing the face of a pretty girl who eyed the man with a sort of terrified expression.

"Very well indeed, Theresa, but for one omission—you ought to have had Mdme. Heudicourt's purse before you gave her the prophecy. Luckily," he added, coolly donning a hat hanging beside the arras and a sword and belt in another hiding-place, "they will not have proceeded far."

"Oh, what would you do?" cried the girl, trying, but with a timid gesture, to stay him.

"Carry out the motto of your esteemed mother La Voisin, and your father, now lodged in the Bastille—recover the purse which you allowed to slip your fingers—what the little finger loses, let the thumb regain."

And he darted out of the mysterious house on the track of the three ladies of the court.

CHAPTER IX

BRETONS TO THE RESCUE

ALONE on the threshold of the inn, Joel felt a deep sinking at his lonesomeness in the great city.

He was dismayed at the strange sights and unknown people. He would willingly have rushed into the arms of the first acquaintance he spied, even had that been the young gentleman who had insulted him at Locmaria. But he was not the man to dwell long in torpor and discouragement. Something drew him forth with a sudden pang: it was his appetite. Our Breton had that of his time of life and of his illustrious ancestor.

He remembered the fact that he had not eaten since the morning.

"I must find a house, and a table well spread within it," he thought to himself.

Reflecting on what Mdlle. du Tremblay had said on quitting him, about her going to live in the neighbourhood of the Palais Royal, he concluded that it was there he ought to seek lodgings, but first he had to find that quarter.

Inquiring of a passer-by, he learnt the direction, which took him through the St. Honore gate, and the street of the same name.

The long walk did not deter him, for he had good legs. The long sword of Porthos, however, interfered with him by slapping against his calves, for he had not been in the habit of wearing a sword at Locmaria. This constant beating made him fretful and slackened his gait. Add the multitude of novelties which detained him as he strolled, while the Parisians stopped to stare at him, amazed by his Breton dress and his bewildered air. But the laugh died on their lips when they saw how he towered above their heads and had

broad shoulders to support the rebuke he would certainly have administered to any jester. But still all tended to delay him: so that it was dusk when he reached the Palais Royal, and dark at the Rue Croix des Petits-Champs, where, it being a crossing point of streets, he halted to ask his way again.

The worst of it was that the passengers were few. With the twilight, door and blinds were drawn.

Paris went to rest early in these days.

Some distance beyond them, a man debouched into the same street from a dark alley which few would care to tread. It was the man called Walton, who had followed the women in the manner familiar to thieves and police spies—in other words, he divined their route and ran by a short cut to come up with them. But he kept under cover of the houses, and they did not perceive him at first. Besides, all their attention was directed towards Joel, who was decidedly endeavouring to accost them. In fact, he had no sooner seen them than, taking them for three good-wives hastening home, he desired to ask his road of them.

He ran to catch up with them. They took fright and also began to run, which was into the arms of Walton, who had but to turn at any time to catch them. But the Bretons are headstrong, and in this respect Joel was doubly a Breton. Fast as the women fled, so he increased his pace.

It was a natural interruption to the grave thoughts with which the three had quitted the prophetess. Mdme. Heudicourt was still confounded by the saucy retort of the strange witch; the fair marchioness had a crease in the forehead which denoted deep meditation. And the dark-complexioned future queen was dreaming of her coronation.

They were hastening along when they first heard Joel's martial step.

Paris by night had no other lights, the moon excepted, than lanterns which the police regulations

ordered to be hung out. To the number of sixty, they were supposed to give sufficient light for the half-million inhabitants. The result was that with the last sunbeam, the doleful thoroughfares were transformed, into prowling grounds for beggars, mostly sturdy, thieves of all sorts, pickers-up of drunken men to rob them of any trifles, and the scum generally.

On finding themselves pursued, the three ladies exchanged a glance of growing fear. Without speaking, they hurried on. But they not only failed to make headway, but they did not overtake the ingenious Walton, who kept in advance to execute the manœuvre of separating Mdme. Heudicourt, who had not left her purse, from her companions.

"Beyond a doubt," said the brunette, "we are followed."

"He is armed," said Mdme. Heudicourt: "I caught a glimmer of the light on the hilt of his rapier."

The tall lady said nothing, but she thought: "I dare say I have been recognised, as easily as the fortune-teller told me. I have many enemies at court, and they may have hired an assassin to kill me in the streets."

The three took the turn which led them to the water-side by the Louvre. A prey to growing terror, they huddled together, and feeling their hearts beat as though to burst.

"Good heaven, I can go no further," murmured the marshal's niece.

The dark woman was also nearly fainting, and she breathed: "We can never reach our destination."

"Courage," said the third, "here is the New Bridge (*Pont Neuf*). We may meet some patrol of the night watch."

They did not know that the watchmen were very careful how they marched around for fear that they would meet some band of highwaymen.

Expecting to reach the only possible protection, they

hastened still more but suddenly a fresh terror arose in their path; it was Walton, who thought that his time to intervene had come as he spied Joel, and from his persistency in following the fugitives, was naturally taken for a prowler. To avoid being caught between the two, the ladies turned into the first opening. It was a dark court, and unfortunately for them, an alley which had no thoroughfare.

"I have them," chuckled Walton, to whom these backways had no secrets: "They are in the trap, pretty pigeons."

At the same instant, he and Joel came to the mouth of the defile. They gave a glance at each other, but all was dark and neither could well distinguish the other's features, or the details of the costume. The sorceress's colleague therefore continued in his delusion that he had met a roamer of his species, and accosted him familiarly:

"They will be sure to come back into our arms, comrade. I suppose it will be the usual division: share and share alike? One of them, I know, carries a purse."

"What!" exclaimed the Breton, surprised and indignant, "do you take me for a thief?"

The other imagined that the protest was ironical, and promptly rejoined:

"Ha, ha! that is good. It is agreed, then? the purse to be divided, and the woman to fall to us as chance directs. They are not ferocious, to be out after dark. Here they come, lad!"

"And there you go, villain!" shouted our exasperated hero, as, scorning to use even the flat of his sword on such a despicable ruffian, he delivered to Walton so formidable a blow with his hand that the unlucky scamp rolled in the road.

Simultaneously the three ladies returned: they had found no thoroughfare, and had determined to throw themselves on the mercy of the cutpurses, by giving

up their money, and, as a last resort, to threaten them with dire chastisement in announcing their real quality.

What was their surprise, not merely to see a brief wrangle between the two men terminate by one knocking the other down, but the victor, taking off his hat with a flourish, very naturally inquire in a frank, round voice:

"Pardon me, ladies, but may I ask the right road to the Palais Royal?"

The women felt inclined to laugh; but one, mastering the revulsion of feeling which gave them relief, said:

"What! was it to ask your way that——"

"I have been forced to gallop after you for an hour? Just so, my ladies; and I mean no blame to you when I say that you gave me much trouble."

"Then you are not a thief?" went on the questioner.

"That is what that fellow thought whom I knocked down for his uncomplimentary opinion. Tell me, are there so many robbers in your city that every other man is taken for one? I am but an unfortunate stranger in Paris."

"A stranger?"

"Yes, I have just alighted from the Nantes coach, and come from where I was born and always have lived—Belle-Isle-en-Mer."

The dark woman whispered to the fair one:

"It seems all right. I recognise his attire. It is that of the better class of Bretons in the country."

Mdme. Heudicourt, pointing to Walton, lying in the gutter, asked:

"Is he dead?"

"Oh, dear no, I think not. I struck only with my open hand. And, if you will supply me with the directions I need, I will take my departure."

The fact was, hunger was pinching him again.

"One moment, sir!" It was the one of the three

who had been greeted by the witch as the Marchioness de Montespan, and her hand was laid on Joel's arm to prevent his going.

"What more can I do for you?" he inquired, rather impatiently and not in the least agitated by the contact—for he could but faintly distinguish the ravishing shape of the unrivalled hand and arm.

"Sir, I take you to be a gallant cavalier——"

"Thanks! though I do not know so much about that, if the test be to chastise such a knave as that. Gallant? I try to be so, though I know nothing of fine city manners. As for being a cavalier, I only want a horse for that."

His tone was so clear and sprightly that the marchioness studied him closely, as well as the light allowed, and remarked that he was by his carriage, robust but free and even elegant, a man of good race and not deformed by labour in the fields. So she modified the haughtiness in her voice and bearing, and continued:

"My dear sir, I have a request to make. My friends and I have been misled so as to be some distance from our dwellings. Another such misadventure might rise in our path—ugly meetings are so frequent in this quarter. We cannot dispense with the shield of your arm and your ready courage. Do not leave us, weak and lonely, in the dead of night. Pray accompany us, until we are safely indoors."

"Oh, indeed, do not leave us to ourselves," entreated Mdme. Heudicourt.

The last of the three said nothing, but her large eyes spoke for her.

At this demand, our hero drew his belt more tightly to quell that wolfish hunger, and likewise overcome a yielding to weariness, he showed he had the mettle of a knight by saying, and meaning it:

"Ladies, I am at your service."

They walked in the direction of St. Jacques suburb.

The convoy was apparently completely encouraged. A very little more would have set them laughing at their recent fright.

"Ladies," said Joel, who found the silence a burden, "there is a saying that all roads lead to Rome. I should be glad to know if you have any such proverb here, regarding the Palais Royal, and does every road lead there?"

"Must you go to that place?" inquired Mdme. Heudicourt.

"Yes: for I have acquaintances there," responded the youth, blushing. "Persons whom I ought to keep near to, in order to lend them assistance when required."

"And would you walk through the town at night to offer them that?"

"Why not?"

"Alone?"

"A man is never alone when his sword is by him."

"Ah! that is rather a neat reply," muttered the brunette to the blonde. "What do you think of him?"

The latter made no reply, for she was busy in weighing the capabilities of the youth. To cope with her enemies, besides the poison phial, she might require the sword of the bravo; and one who was attached to her by an affection which she doubted not she could at will enkindle, would be worth risking. Joel did not even guess the scrutiny of which he was the object.

"But good friend as a sword is," he remarked, "it is often in the way, to say nothing of its not suiting my dress." Then as they passed under a lamp, he subjoined in the same spirit of apology, "It is a costume that has turned many a head here, all the same; though, for that matter, an honest heart may beat under it the same as under any other more in the fashion."

"What may your name be?" inquired the fair woman.

"I am not sure what it might be, but it is Joel, for want of a better: may I ask yours?"

"Athenaïs."

"Pretty! it suits you like a glove!"

"Do you mean it?"

"Why, to be sure I do, for it is majestic and impossible."

"And do you think I am a little that way?"

"Quite so—you look like a great lady of the royal court!"

"Look at that, now! a compliment! it is plain that Brittany belongs to France!"

She kept her eyes on him more closely than before. He had pierced the incognito.

On the other hand, he was worthy the admiration of the finest court lady. His tall figure, with the long, stalwart limbs, gave his every movement the gracefulness of nature, as in a wild buck. His bashfulness was free from awkwardness, and the fiery energy of his features, when he was roused, would have been the envy of a prince. The sham citizen's wife, a judge of men, saw clearly in his eyes a whole poem of audacious candour.

"Ah!" here she pretended to slip. "Oh, Squire Joel, the pavement is so slippery—and the night as black as in an oven—let me beg you to offer me your kind aid."

"With pleasure, Mistress Athenaïs."

He presented his arm, and the hand of "Mistress Athenaïs" was pendent on his own, but it was hers alone that slightly quivered. After an *Aurore du Tremblay*, even a *Montespan*—at past thirty, at least—fell into the second place.

They were now at the Place St. Michel.

"Squire," said the marchioness, "I wager that you have come to town to seek your fortune."

"Guess again, and you will be wrong. To make my fortune is my aim."

"So Dame Fortune is the only one of the fickle sex that attracted you?"

"Woman? Oh, dear, no, not a woman, but it is a man whom I am in quest of."

"Ah, a patron lord, perhaps?"

"A lord, I believe; but more than a patron; the arbiter of my future, my fate, my all."

But feeling that his frankness was leading him too far among strangers, he interrupted himself by exclaiming:

"Turn to the right—they are demolishing that house, and we run the risk of something falling on our heads—to say nothing of that heap of rubbish."

"I was asking you of whom you are in search?"

"A little to the left—mind the water! you were all but stepping into it."

She caught his eye and, shaking her finger at him, she said playfully:

"Oh, you Breton backed by a Norman! is it thus that you throw the hounds off the scent? All your politeness was merely to keep you secret from me."

"It does not belong to me," observed Joel gravely, "but to a woman who is dead."

"Good! keep it. That is not the kind they steal in Paris, and I am not in the habit of fawning to obtain my ends. Still, hearken! If chance brings it about that you do not gain from the person in question, or if you simply do not find him, what will you do?"

"Become a soldier of the king, and go and seek my fortune where there are blows and danger to face."

"I am certain that you will make your way in the army—if you boast ever so little of good birth to get you a rank—or if you have a friend to help you on."

"What sort of friend?"

"One who loves you, or one on whom you can depend, and having influence so that you could be presented at court——"

The squire burst into a hearty laugh.

"Ho, ho! Such a friend must have so long an arm that she could, without stooping, untie the rosettes on her shoes. Even in Paris such friends are not rained down from the skies."

"In spite of that, you shall not die for want of them—I give you my word. With your good looks and your valour——"

The doubting youth began to hum a Christmas canticle.

She interrupted him by abruptly demanding:

"My companion, have you not a sweetheart?"

They were now in the St. Jacques ward. The marchioness's companions trotted on discreetly a few paces behind the pair, pretending not to listen, but straining themselves to overhear.

But our hero remained dumb to the leading question. It had called up in his mind the image of Aurore, and he saw her walking up the hills of the Saumur highway with her graceful figure imparting sinuous movements to her dress; her straw hat, for the journey, dangling on her arm by its ribbons, and the wind swung it and tossed her hair.

At length, in a voice that betrayed emotion, he answered: "I have not what we call a sweetheart, but one that is my beloved."

"Heavens! and how long have you been in that way?"

"To speak the truth, lady—only this evening."

"And how did you know it?"

"Very easy: by my feelings. My pulse beat as if I had fever; the blood rushed about me as though it was water when a dam has burst, and the blood seemed a fiery fluid. My heart grew too large for the breast; and my temples were encircled by a crown of fire!"

"Why, this is the *grand passion* or I am no judge," she exclaimed with a cooing like a dove. "Such a flame as is not often encountered—the real one, good and ardent."

"Never before did womankind produce such an effect on me! deuce take me if it seemed natural!"

The lady's dilated eyes darted a stream of fire. The guiltless rustic was making her fancy that he was declaring sudden love for her.

"Ah, what could a man give in return for such love?" she inquired.

"All that I have—nothing to speak of—my life!"

He drew himself up to his full height, with the heroism of his ancestors, Antoine, Gaspard, Porthos, glowing in him. She was struck dumb with admiration.

"So you would defend this idol against anybody?"

"Yes!"

"And if any one conspired her injury——"

Extreme pallor overspread the Breton's countenance; for an instant he dwelt motionless; then his body seemed to grow; his long locks seemed to turn to rays around his head as in the pictures of the Archangel Michael; one expected a flood of burning words to rush from his lips. But he murmured solely this, in a hollow voice:

"I would kill—were it you!"

"What?" screamed the marchioness, "you would kill even me? I do not understand! then, you did not mean me?"

"I would stab the king himself, if the king intended mischief to Aurore——"

"Aurore?" she repeated, eyeing him in stupefaction.

"You said Aurore? who bears that name?"

"The lady whom I love."

"Oh, the lady of your love?"

"I have never loved elsewhere—I shall never love but her, and she is going to be my wife as soon as I conquer what will make me worthy of her hand and her affection—name, rank and fortune!"

The marchioness tore her arm from the speaker's, and said curtly, as he now looked at her in astonishment:

"We have arrived, and no longer need your kind assistance."

Here stood a low, mournful and sprawling house, standing back in a garden with a yard in front, behind high walls. The two stories had a mansard roof, and the two wings were for domestic offices and stables. On account of the colour of the stones and the slate roof, the neighbours called it the Grey House.

The coachyard doors were on the street; at the bang of the knocker on them, an old servant came to open and show them all into the yard.

"Honorin, have the horses put to the carriage," commanded the lady whom Joel had specially escorted as she crossed the threshold.

"Is your ladyship returning to St. Germain's?" respectfully inquired the man.

"No; I am going to stay here. It is to drive this gentleman to the Palais Royal."

She nodded coldly to our Breton, who was buffeted from one surprise to another.

"Methinks that is where the lovely object of your affection, so eloquently painted, deigns to dwell on earth?" she sneered.

At this moment, a boy of about eight years appeared on the doorsteps; he wore a royal scarlet velvet suit, trimmed with rich lace of gold and silver thread; he had an intelligent face, fine but melancholy in the features, but unfortunately he had a club foot and one leg was shorter than the other. He hobbled along to throw himself into the dark woman's arms, covering her with kisses and crying out in delight:

"So you have come home at last, dear mother! I could not go to bed until I saw you, from fear that something had happened to you."

"My lord," said the recipient of these tokens of affection, "Do you not see the marchioness your mother?"

Thus rebuked, the boy turned towards the

Marchioness de Montespan, and wished her "Good evening!" but without going up to her.

"Tut, tut!" said the marchioness, biting her lip. "here's a to-do because your governess has been taken away from you for a little while! Fie! you ought to be in bed at this hour, Louis. Here, Madame Heudicourt, take him to his room and see that he is put to bed instantly."

The governess took a step to carry out the order, but the little cripple burst into tears and clung to her skirts.

"My lady," interposed the latter, "allow me to manage this. The duke will never go off to rest unless I sing him to sleep with a song, or tell him a story."

La Montespan snapped her fingers in indifference.

"Do as you please, thou personification of wisdom! I am ready to drop with fatigue, and intend to rest. Order my woman to come and undress me."

Joel had stood wonderstricken by all that he saw and heard.

"Young master," she proceeded, "it is always folly to set the burden of real love upon one, but worse when one is trying to reach fortune—then, it is rank stupidity."

She held out her hand to him in a way that indicated he was to kiss it, which he did on the finger tips: and she sailed up the steps with a queenly port. The governess was on the verge of following her, having taken up her pupil in her arms to spare him the pains of mounting the steps: but before departing, she said to the youth, whose tall form gave him the aspect of an exclamation-point:

"Squire Joel, here comes the carriage of the Marchioness de Montespan, which will set you down wherever you like to say. My noble friend has omitted, I think, to thank you for the service done us. I remember it for her. If ever you have need of my services, do not hesitate to come and knock at this door, and call upon Françoise d'Aubigne."

CHAPTER X

FRIQUET'S LITTLE TROUBLES

THE sign of the " Moorish Trumpeter " derives its title from a combination of happy or unhappy circumstances, brought about, no doubt, by the eccentric action of the wind acting on its signboard, which swung and groaned over its door: this sheet of iron, framed in oak, rusted by the weather, had once been painted by some budding Raffaele with the portrait of a blackamoor blowing an enormous trumpet. The house stood in the street called *Pas de la Mule*, which ended in the arcades of the *Place Royal*. It was a venerable structure having a pepper-box turret on the roof, and the front made of stonework and cross beams. The first floor above ground jutted out over the street, and contained a lattice-windowed room where the host lodged for one night or longer, any one not coming on horseback. He himself slept in the garret with his first drawer-of-wine—the only one. The ground-floor was divided between the dining-room and the kitchen, without there being even a partition.

The portion bordering on the street was given up to the customers. The other boasted of a fireplace in which an ox might have been roasted whole. But on holidays this gigantic feast was replaced with a fowl or a joint; now a leg of mutton, turning on a spit before two or three logs on the hearthstone. Nothing could be more primitive, or business-like, than this eating-house with the kitchen on the premises. Here were the tables and benches shining with the frequent application of elbows and the customers' breeches. There, the kitchen pots and pans, carefully shining like gold and silver ware, though only copper and pewter.

In the midst of these, was hung a long sword, crossed by the long spit only used on grand feast days.

Master Bonaventure Bonlarron, the host, had been a soldier before roasting and carving spring chickens. Sergeant in the Laferte regiment and wounded by a musket bullet in the famous charge of the Duke of Enghien at Rocroy, he had most unwillingly laid down his arms and turned his flag into the innkeeper's apron. Not that he had lost any money by the change of trade, for the inn was well placed to coin for him and was much frequented from its neighbourhood to the Place Royale. But only at the first, when it was the fashion to drop in at the "Moor's" to take the last meal before going to fight a duel, or toast the victor when the party returned from the field of honour. But Louis XIV. had never forgotten the revolution of the Fronde, when he had suffered much humiliation, and he was severe against single combats.

The good old days of the "Moor" had departed, and rarely did the master see among his peaceful guests one or two of the bellicose spirits that once rattled his dishes about his ears with oaths, and the stamping of foot with which the swash-bucklers invited the antagonist to cross steel.

This Sunday evening, Master Bonlarron was alone in his establishment, with his waiter Bistoquet. The former was a tall, bony man wearing a cook's dress of white, but even in this he showed that he was warlike, for he had cocked the cap over one ear, and he walked from kitchen to dining-room with a swagger.

His man was a homely lad of about twenty, with long awkward limbs, and gaunt hands, which broke more dishes than ogling did hearts in that quarter.

"Confound it!" ejaculated the innkeeper, coming to a halt in a military position after his uneasy stroll; "the golden days seem gone for ever, when handfuls of money, from the noblest purses of the realm, were scattered over these very tables and the best wines of my vaults flowed like water. If only the citizens would have riots with the soldiery! but, no, they are all con-

tent to sling bad words at each other and nobody whips out a knife. It is disgusting! After a good riot, I should dish up my mutton to the survivors, but there it is, roast to a crisp! we shall have to eat it, Bistoquet."

The waiter drew a long face.

"Thank you, master, very much, but I am not fond of dark meat—it is black as the Moor's head over the door, or a lump of soot."

"Well, dish it up and put it on the table, while I put up the shutters and bar the door. The day is gone."

And the cook-shopkeeper moved towards the door, where, just as he reached the sill, a joyous voice chirped with the oily accents of the languid Parisian:

"All hail, mine host and company? Are you quite well? so glad! I feel that way myself. Which noble lord is the proprietor of this *casa*, as the Italians says?"

"I, my gentleman," responded Bonlarron, bowing to the customer, who came so late and addressed him so merrily.

He was a man of about forty-five, but to such age does not count. In vivacity, mirth, quickness and briskness he was ever a boy; but the *gamin of Paris*, who would lose his head to have a jest with the Grand Seignior, or to eat the Pope's favourite dish. He had a small, round face, scarcely wrinkled, although it had seen all kinds of hard weather: inextinguishably bright eyes, never at rest: a turn-up nose; prominent cheek-bones, tokens of tenacity and subtlety: and a sharp chin. He wore a peculiar dress, which might have been composed on a battlefield by stripping the dead of all arms: the legs were bound with leather thongs like an Italian mountaineer's; the waist had a wide woollen sash like a Spaniard's; his body was encased in a buff leather coat such as used to be worn under armour; he had a dagger and a sword and also the ink bottle and a quill which lawyers and clerks carried at

the buttonhole in front of the coat. And a small cap with a prodigious long feather, clasped by a monstrous piece of glass which had been cut out of an old church window and in vain would pass for a ruby.

What spoilt him was the shape of his legs. Sitting down, he would have passed muster as a full-sized man, but on his feet he was but a dwarf.

He skipped nimbly into the middle of the dining-room, which Bistoquet had illuminated by applying a splinter from the fire to a pair of hanging lamps. Thereupon, with volubility and without waiting to be spoken to, he said:

"Gentlemen, you see before you the prodigal son. I am a son of Paris who returns to his native city, the unrivalled, the inimitable, and I grant that I am happy again. I was well known in my youth in the neighbourhood of the cathedral; the very birds that picked up the crumbs on the pavement in front, knew Renaud Friquet!" He took off his cap when mentioning his own name. "I was a choir-boy, and at my own hours, wine-drawer in the finest drinking booth in the Rue de Calandre. Hail to you, also of our noble profession, that of St. Boniface! But do not for an instant think that I am trying to get a free meal on the cheap. Oh no! I am on the high road to fortune—title, rank, and all that. I have not travelled and warred over half the world not to know a thing or two. Though I am a Parisian, I can see farther than my own belfries. Yes, I am Little Friquet, albeit the old king-demon may burn me, if I can imagine why!" He flipped his fingers disdainfully. "As if a giant was needed when a hard piece of work is to be done. Why, our king is no taller than I, even on the celebrated high heels on which he stalks." He waved his hand for the innkeeper to close his mouth. "But let us not discuss royalty and policy. Let me rather talk of myself, though that is repugnant to my delicacy, for I loathe to acquaint the whole world and his wife with my own matters. In

short, I return to my native city, where I was a boy in the days of the Fronde of lively memory, with a letter of recommendation to the Minister of the Navy, and fifty pistoles which I owe to the munificence of his cousin, Lord Colpert du Terron, Naval Steward, for having saved him from drowning in the port of Rochelle. You see that it needs not being a colossus to put a great man under obligation to you. So I sailed from Rochelle to Havre, and came up to Paris by the boat, which landed me at the Wharf. Now I stand in need of a good meal and a good bed. Are you prepared to supply yours truly with one or the other?"

"My master, I have a room that will suit your lordship admirably," answered the eating-house proprietor, with the deference due an eloquent speaker who had also a ministerial letter and fifty pistoles in his pockets.

"That is good! I take the room."

"Besides, if your lordship will deign to be content with a fine leg of mutton that I was reserving for my own table——"

The waiter hid his smiling mouth with his hand.

"Mutton? I have always revelled in it. Better and better! I will deign. You shall see, my friend, that though the Parisians are reckoned dainty, I can use a good knife and fork. May old Nick devour me if I leave you more than the knuckle."

"Hold hard!" broke in another voice on the threshold, "I hope that you will spare me some."

Every one turned, and they had no difficulty in seeing who spoke, for the tall form of Joel filled up the doorway. He came from the part where he had left the noble dames. There he was, wandering in the dark, when he caught sight of the light of the inn, in an adjacent street. He steered towards the beacon, and with good luck, recognised the tavern sign. The door too, stood ajar for the better welcome to the famished.

So Joel was walking in quietly and waiting for a

favourable instant to make his modest request when he was obliged to hear Little Friquet's harangue, which ended with a prospect of his chance of a meal being blocked.

It is a fact founded on the stupidity of man, that the dwarfs have always hated the giants. Friquet was no exception to the tradition, for he eyed the taller guest with impertinence, and in a quarrelsome tone demanded his business.

"Not business, but a pleasure, I expect," replied the Breton. "I desire, sir, to remind you of a saying which so great a traveller and warrior must have heard in his pilgrimage through the world. It talks of the necessity of charity to your neighbour."

"What do you mean by all that?"

Our hero swung his hat in his hand, and in the most affable manner continued:

"It means that I, too, have come from afar, in quest of lodging and something to eat. I shall not be sorry to share with you the delicacies of this famous establishment."

It was now the turn of the landlord to doff his cap and make his bow to this second wearer of a sword.

"Besides, each pays his scot," said the countryman. "Share and share alike. Are you willing?"

If the little Parisian were agreeable, he did not look it. It was with a very sour look that he snappishly responded to the youth who stood over him:

"Bother take you! I ordered that mutton and I shall keep it."

"You are not polite," said Joel tranquilly. "But I am too thirsty to be dainty—dry as an old nail in a vine-stake."

And reaching his arm over Friquet's head and past the landlord's ear, he took up a pewter pot from the counter, and scarcely stopping to test what it was by the smell, he drained nearly a quart of the contents at a draught.

Meanwhile the little Parisian's eyes flared up like a cat's on whose tail one had stepped.

"Not polite?" he repeated in a loud voice.

"Botheration. Have you an invention for teaching me a lesson in etiquette—you who look to come out of the marshes of Brittany, to me, who is a Parisian born? Let me tell you that I deal stripes and lashes to hulking fellows who have threatened to stow me away in their pockets."

"Hold!" returned the Breton impatiently, "the size of you and me is not in debate: the trouble to satisfy is in our teeth, which seem to be the same length. If they do not set something eatable before us, nothing will be left but our swords and daggers, for we shall have eaten one another alive—and without waiting to strip off the rind. Besides," as he compared the leg of mutton, which Bistoquet had brought into the eating-room, with Friquet's form, "I can never think that you expect to consume alone a joint of those dimensions."

"Why not?"

"Because there is a rule against it——"

"What rule is there against it, pray?"

"The rule of three: the ability to accomplish the feat must be shown."

The landlord rubbed his hands, highly amused at the joke, and the coarser Bistoquet laughed out aloud.

Friquet leaped up in the air as if to crack his heels like a gamecock, and when he came down he had drawn his sword.

"Man, you have insulted me, for I know whether I am small or not. But I do not allow the remark to be made. Perdition! you shall pay for these affronts."

"The landlord can put it in the bill. But, think, when we shall have cut a slash or two in our skins——"

"You seem to be tender about yours?"

"Well, yes, I did not bring a change out of Brittany."

"The truth is that you are afraid."

"Afraid? I do not know all the words in the Parisian jargon, and I know not what you mean."

While Joel was saying this with a smile, Bonlarron warmed up with evident gratification. His waiter plucked him by the sleeve.

"Good gracious!" he gasped, "are they really going to cut each other's throat?"

"It looks like it," replied the inn-keeper, radiant with joy: "and if only the luck falls that one of them shall be laid out on the floor, we may have the fashion revived to dine here after duels and breakfast before them! proceedings to which I owed the old-time vogue of my clouded establishment."

"But there are edicts against single combats, master."

"Edicts," grumbled the ex-soldier, eyeing his man with profound commiseration. "Edicts are plenty against all recreations of the rich and the people. If there were no edicts how could one have the fun of breaking them? Come, will you bet on the fight?" He examined the pair who were taking on one another's measure visually—the Breton, calm, good-humoured, taunting, and the Parisian nervous, agitated and lashing himself into fury.

"Both brave, but one as nervous as a cat, while the other is cool as a Polar bear. Which will you lay a crown upon?"

"Master, master, you cannot allow them to come to blows. You ought to interfere. You should exercise your authority."

"Exercise my sword, yes." He ran to shut up the house so that the watch should not disturb them, and called for his rapier when this care was taken. While it was brought him, he threw off his white apron.

"Do you think, boy, that I am going to stand with my arms folded while the gentlemen have it out?"

"You don't mean to say that you are going to fight, too?"

"Sdeath! but fight I will?"

"With whom? the best one?"

"With the worst one here—with you, fool!"

"With me?" repeated the waiter, terrified.

"We will be the seconds to these gentlemen, according to the code of honour. You shall take one part, and I the other: so—then, a fight in the good old style!"

"But I do not carry a sword, master!"

"You may use the big silvered skewer!"

"Goodness!"

"Yes, perhaps it is longer than my toadsticker; but you can have that point in your favour."

In the meantime, Joel had unsheathed his blade; but to make a final appeal for reconciliation, he said:

"Come, let us sup first: plenty of time to cross swords afterwards."

"No, no!" protested Friquet, "straightway—Death of my life! To it!" and with his uplifted sword he menaced the Breton, who had only just time to fall into the position of one expecting an attack.

The exasperated Parisian rushed on with such impetuosity that the blades were engaged up to the hilt. Happily the Son of Porthos had as much coolness with the naked steel as with buttoned foils; he disengaged his blade from such close quarters and took a step backward.

"Oh!" sneered the fiery little man, "the Goliath retreats."

"I am not retreating: I am merely breaking free; and in all countries where sword play is a science, to free the blade is part of the game and not a retreat."

While lecturing, the stranger to town parried the

thrusts and lunges of the Parisian, though quick, hot and varied, without making any return.

"Horns of the fiend, I believe you are fooling with me!" snarled the latter.

"There is no doubt of it, sir," replied Joel placidly; and launching out a lunge, he said at the same time, "If I had really let go, you would be spitted like the leg of mutton."

In truth the infuriated little hero felt the long sword touch his side, but so lightly that he might have thought it was the point of a roughened foil.

"This will have to be ended," he exclaimed.

"Just my idea," observed our hero: "I am not asking for anything else, for I am hungry to the very tip of my toes."

Making a feint which his opponent parried with a circular sweep, he entangled the Parisian's blade and with a sharp movement, sent it to the other end of the room.

"Settle me, kill me outright, instead of disarming me," shrieked the mad little fellow, foaming at the mouth with shame, rage and humiliation.

But the Son of Porthos calmly restored his weapon to the scabbard, with the remark: "You see, if I were to kill you, we should not dine together." He went and picked up the fallen sword and with a bow returned it to him. "I hope now," he went on in his frank, round voice, "that you will not draw back from the feast for which you so valiantly fought."

It was out of the question to be vexed with such good humour.

"Halloa, landlord, set the board out for two—three—all who like! I invite you all to join me and our hero."

Friquet was for an instant overcome by his defeat; he was red and confused, while he trembled. But won over by the antagonist's loftiness, he took a step up to him, and said in a low voice full of lively feeling:

"My master, I was wrong. I behaved like a curmudgeon in picking this quarrel with you, instead of merely picking that bone. It is my confounded dwarfish stature which upsets my brain, and I wish to goodness that I could grow out of the testy mood. It ill becomes the Parisian, that is, the most civilised being on the earth, and before you, too, who are clearly a genuine gentleman. Come, now, will you let this pass, and be my friend?"

"With the greatest pleasure," replied Joel, imitating his action. "My hand on it; we will be friends for life, until death do us part. Now, let us give our minds to eating," he added merrily, "this fencing within four walls wondrously sharpens the appetite. We will drink to the prolongation of our acquaintance."

Master Bonlarron was looking around.

"Plague on it all," he said, "whatever has become of my man? I believe this king of cowards has fainted."

"I am here, master," breathed a gentle voice from under the table, where the illustrious Bistoquet had hidden himself.

The veteran looked at him with a scornful glance and bade him hasten to serve, "though methinks you are but ill fitted to wait at the board where such valorous chevaliers deign to sit."

The guests were soon engaged with the joint; it was eminently tough and hard, but had it been leather, it could not have resisted the teeth of the famished. Besides, the wine at the "Trumpeter's" was delicious, and by the time the dessert was reached, the four—for the juice of the grape made them lenient even to the waiter—all were jolly together. The ex-sergeant told stories of the camp, march and field, the waiter chirped a song of his own composition, and the new friends chatted about their hopes and dreams.

Friquet, whom we left chorister and drawer in a tavern, odd servitor of the spirit divine and the spirits

of wine, had indeed roved far. Finally, fostered by M. Colbert du Terron, High Steward of Rochelle, he had some knowledge about the navy and war. He had invented a new build for ships to improve their speed; and other "ingenious devices," as they said then, induced the steward to send the Parisian back to his native city to see if he might not falsify the old saying about prophets.

On his part, the rustic squire, no less communicative from the good wine, narrated the events heralding his birth, those of his youth and what occurred on the road and in the town. What most struck the intelligent hearer was the names of the three brothers-in-arms of Porthos, which were to serve the youth as stepping-stones in his search.

"Stay!" ejaculated he, "at least, I know one of the three who are strangers to you."

"Is it possible?"

"It is Captain d'Artagnan, no less!"

"Captain?"

"Captain commanding the two companies of the red and black musketeers. I was only a boy when I went to see him, but a boy does not forget those who pull his ears and give him money. Faith, he promised to cut my ears off once—and he would have done it, for I was riding a stolen horse of a friend of his—and he rewarded me with a kick of which I cherished the memory. What a fighter—you should have seen him the day they arrested town-counsellor Broussel—that was a riot, such as we never see in these degenerate days," rattled on Friquet, rubbing his hands with a warrior's glee which was shared by the grinning landlord. "Bricks and chimney-pots flying like snowflakes, the citizens flying to arms, and M. d'Artagnan facing two thousand, roaring, rampageous men as if he were a stone statue out of the cathedral. Ah, he was one of them! the paladins that we read about. Then to see the cowardly mob melt away, like the snow I spoke

about, when he spied his squadron coming up. 'Present arms—make ready!' but, 'Sblood! which was his pet oath—before he could say, 'Fire!' the crowd had fled on all sides and Broussel was lugged away to the Bastille in double-quick time. Oh, yes, let me alone for knowing M. d'Artagnan, the bravest of the brave, but likewise the most wily of the wily—but then, he was the typical Gascon—the master of the world, if he had wanted it."

"Indeed!"

"My master the beadle of Notre Dame was also once in the private service of a friend of Captain d'Artagnan's—stop a bit—this, too, may have been one of the three you mention—well, my master Bazin, after he had been tasting the wine which we supplied from our tavern for the sacramental vessels, would let his tongue wag. Oh, the special cohort of M. d'Artagnan and he executed the grandest feats of arms in the reign before my time! They coped with the famous Cardinal Richelieu, and made but a mouthful of Cardinal Mazarin, the Italian sneak! If the gentleman you seek was a friend of Captain d'Artagnan, then he is worth looking for, I warrant."

"What has become of the captain?" inquired Joel, with that relief which one feels when something tangible begins to appear where one dreaded a delusion.

Friquet shook his head, already sad at having to disappoint a new friend.

"That is the point where I am wrong; for I have been playing the rolling-stone, when, had I stuck to the ecclesiastical calling—or the taverner's, I should have been a beadle, bar my non-imposing mien, or a host like our worthy Boniface at my elbow. I know no more than you who is head of the church in town or of the royal body-guard."

"Do not rely on me for aid," remarked the wine-shop-keeper, "since his majesty offended his good city by living in a palace outside of it, I am no longer in-

formed respecting the court and garrison. Captain d'Artagnan may be dead or retired, although we old soldiers have life riveted to our bodies."

"It is easy to make inquiries," Friquet suggested.

"In what quarter," demanded the Breton eagerly.

"In the musketeers' quarters, of course. Some are still in existence, and they are only fit to supply the oven of 'Old Nick' if they do not cherish the memory of their old commanders."

"You are right, my friend. The next thing is to find where the musketeers are quartered."

"That is easy," said the landlord: "As they are the royal household troops, they will have followed the king into Flanders."

"Good again," said Friquet, "but the campaign is over; I heard that his majesty had gone back to Lille, and so that is where the clue must be sought for."

"One minute," said the master Boniface, "you need not go so far, for all the musketeers would not have gone there. A troop will have been kept at St. Germain's to guard the queen. This I am sure of, as I met the Viscount de Bregy the other day, one of my customers, who is also a musketeer—corporal of the squadron left, as I say."

"Do you think he would know anything about Captain d'Artagnan?"

"It would be ridiculous if he did not, for he must have served under his orders, as he has been in the corps some thirty years——"

"Thirty years," exclaimed the Parisian, "and not yet shelved? I should think he were more fit to carry a crutch than a musket?"

"M. Friquet," returned the host, smiling in a fatherly way. "I have just seen that you are a plucky gentleman. You will become a redoubtable master of fence when you wear out your impatience, and fortify your theory. Still, though you have youth on

your side, I should not advise you to fall out with M. de Bregy, as I know nobody, unless it be your neighbour here, who could match him in strength of wrist. Ah, the musketeers have always maintained the repute of having the best swordsmen in their ranks!"

"What, another Colossus," sneered the incorrigible Parisian, "I should like to test this military Methuselah. In any case, his brilliant fencing has not very rapidly advanced him in his company."

"Now, you hit the nail. He ought to have been colonel, or major-general, but he is too fond of the winecup, of whipping out his blade and running after the women; he will drink, and dice and frequent the broad road that leadeth to perdition, as you, monsieur, who have been in the choir, will know better than I. Still, he is a perfect gentleman, borrows money with a lofty air as if he conferred the favour, will drink the hardest heads under the table, and fight while there is a stump of steel in the swordhilt. I know that he has been out in the field of honour ten times, and always laid his antagonist low."

"Hurrah for the musketeers," said Friquet grudgingly: "but there is luck in odd numbers—or to them, and the eleventh or thirteenth may lay him out."

"I shall go to St. Germain's to-morrow," observed Joel.

"Certainly," agreed Friquet; "and meanwhile, let us share that room overhead, which can be made double-bedded, I suppose? as we have shared the muton." He rapped on the board with his goblet, crying out: "Another cup, host! Then to rest, all of us. I must be early at the minister's to-morrow, and let me catch any of the clerks make a mock of me." He plumed himself triumphantly and added: "When I wear the royal uniform on my back, it will make me inches taller and no one will refuse me the respect I deserve."

"How long will it take me to get to St. Germain's," inquired the stranger to the town.'

"About two hours at the most, on a good post-horse, which you may hire," replied the tavern-keeper.

"That will do," said our hero, not forgetting Mdlle. du Tremblay. "I can be back for Vespers."

CHAPTER XI

ONE SOURCE OF INFORMATION IS INTERRUPTED

ABOUT the commencement of the month of July and at two o'clock in the afternoon, the fierce sun was heating the stones which have always been the terror of foot passengers and the delight of farriers in the good town of St. Germain. Before the front gateway of the old castle paced two musketeers, with the arm on their shoulder which gave their regiment its name, while another pair, off duty, were sitting on the edge of the ditch, with their legs swinging in the hollow, and their swords dangling between them. Other times, other names—we have not now the names in the corps of Du Verger, De Belliere, etc., but Gace and Hericourt, those on duty, and Champagnac and Escrivaux, for those idling.

In true Spanish fashion, the Queen Maria Theresa was taking her siesta and the court followed her example. So the sentinels were yawning fit to dislocate their jaws, and their comrades in the moat were gaping, when one of the latter had just the strength left to nudge the other and say:

"Escrivaux, look over there, towards the tennis-court—what do you call that queer figure?"

"Why, it is a real live Breton, fresh from the

country," returned the other, glancing in the direction indicated. "A strapping fellow, by Jove! But he must be infernally tough not to be burnt to a crisp in venturing out on the royal highway in a heat equal to roasting a joint."

It was our friend Joel, entering the town after leaving the nag which had brought him from the city at the Sully's-Elm tavern, and coming along by the castle rampart.

"He's coming this way," resumed M. de Champagnac.

"He must have some business with us?" queried M. d'Escrivaux; "as if one wanted to discuss business this weather!"

Coming to a standstill, the new-comer bowed to the musketeers with his usual affability.

"Gentlemen," he began, "may I ask the question if you do not belong to one of the companies of the royal musketeers?"

"We do, as the uniform should tell you."

"We are all at your service," added Champagnac politely, while both rose and returned the salute.

"Your hearty greeting emboldens me to address you a question——"

"Go on, monsieur."

"Only too glad to have it in our power to oblige you."

The bowing went on again, till Joel continued:

"I only want to know if you have any knowledge of Captain d'Artagnan——"

Meanwhile the sentries had lounged up to the speakers, and were listening, with their muskets held at ease. At the magic name, a chorus of admiration broke from all four.

"Captain d'Artagnan! the pride of the regiment whose colours we have the honour to guard! nobody has ever led the musketeers into more glory, and with more energy and fatherly love! He is a cavalier

whose exploits tired the Muse of History to keep the run of. And his memory is preserved as that of one of our bravest and most brilliant officers!"

The Son of Porthos was affected to the heart by this speech.

"Thank you, gentlemen," he said, "You make me proud and happy, for the officer you speak of was my father's friend."

"In that event, we compliment you," said M. de Gace, "for the captain was not prodigal of his friendship and no man could win it who had not also won his spurs of knighthood on the field of battle."

"One word more," said the inquirer: "You spoke of the captain's memory, as though he were dead."

"Why, he has been out of the army list these twenty years," responded Hericourt. "None of us knew him, and it is only by the legends of the messroom that we know what a precious servitor the king lost in him."

Thereupon, as if all wished to prove that not a chapter in the record of the soldier was unknown to them, they spoke one after another:

"Captain d'Artagnan was killed in the campaign in Friesland—By a cannon-ball which struck him in his breast—On the very day when he took by storm the last stronghold which his instructions ordered him to capture from the Hollanders—And at the very instant, too, when his majesty's messenger handed him the patent and truncheon of Marshal of France."

Our hero hung his head.

"Dead!" he exclaimed. "I should have expected it, and yet this certainly makes my heart ache. Gentlemen," he said aloud as he recovered his self-possession, "since you let me trespass on your kindness, permit a final inquiry."

"Proceed."

"Has any of the three names I am about to utter made a previous impression on your ear? *Athos, Porthos, Aramis?*"

The four soldiers seemed to reflect, but finally they replied that this was the first time they had heard such singular names. Joel bowed to take his leave.

"Then, there is no more for me to do than offer you the expression of my gratitude."

But Escrivaux, sympathising with him in his evident disappointment, detained him.

"Stay, stay! Might not those belong to the intrepid musketeers, called the Inseparables? With M. d'Artagnan, who was a gentleman-private in the Queen's Guards at the period, they held the Bastion of St. Gervais at the siege of La Rochelle against a large body of the Calvinists? Gentlemen, you remember the story of the dinner napkin which our comrades set up as a standard on the walls they defended and which King Louis XIII. ordered to be embroidered in gold with the royal lily-flowers?"

"Why, of course we do," replied Champagnac. "You have guessed right. But all that happened so long ago. In the preceding reign——"

"And," said Gace, smiling, "the oldest of us is not over thirty."

"There is only one in the company who could enlighten you on this score," pursued Hericourt, "and he is our corporal M. de Bregy, who is not always in a talkative mood——"

"Not when he has left his money on the card table——"

"Or his wits in a pot of wine——"

"Where is your M. de Bregy to be met with?" shortly inquired the Breton, bent on his own idea.

"In his favourite drinking-place in the Rue Vaches——"

"Or the gambling-den of the Rue Poteau-Juré——"

"Unless he has lingered by the way to chastise some varlet or quarrel with a citizen for having too pretty a daughter——"

"Stay! talk of the wolf and you will see his ears,"

said Escrivaux; "here he comes from behind the walls of the royal kennels."

"You are right," added Champagnac; "be on your guard, comrades. The old bear has cocked his hat awry—a token that he is more angry than usual. Take my advice, and do not accost him just now," he added to the country squire.

"Thanks," was the latter's rejoinder, as he laughed. "This will not be the first time that I have locked horns with a stag and not come off second-best."

In the meantime Corporal Bregy swaggered up, knocking the spurs on his buff leather boots and shaking the red feather of his hat over his ear so that it seemed likely to fall.

This "sore-head," as in military slang was called the veterans galled by the steel cap of service, was of athletic build. Under his scarlet cassock, on which blazed a sun of gold lace with spreading beams, his broad and robust shoulders were prominent, as well as a chest in full proportion to his whole frame. Such a constitution alone could defy a life of debauchery and dissipation. Everything in him reflected that brutal and quarrelsome confidence springing from the consciousness of herculean strength and courage above proof. From this, too, arose an impudence which tempted the most pacific person on whom his taunting gaze fell, to take him by the throat and thrash him into decency.

"How now! my pretty pages, it is thus you conduct yourselves on sentry-go? since when, in the devil's name, have the orders been for soldiers to chat with civilians when under arms? By all that is sacred in the army, I do not know anything but my soft heart that holds me from sending you all into arrest for such behaviour." So he thundered.

"Corporal," said Champagnac. "This gentleman wants to speak to you."

"What gentleman?"

And holding his head back, he scanned the Breton so disdainfully that the latter felt anger flush up into his face. But speedily mastering himself in view of the aim he sought, he began:

"Corporal, I come from master Bonlarrons——"

"The vendor of wine and meats in the Rue Pas-de-Mule? a capital host, that, or the infernal fires may roast me! the best drink that I ever lapped! I fancy I owe him some ten or twelve pistoles. If you have come to dun me, I can tell you that you would have acted wiser to stay in his cellar and drain his biggest tun; for that rascal Vilarceaux, captain of the keepers of the royal spaniels, has raked in my last crown of pay at picquet."

"I do not know anything about your debts——"

"What do you know, then, by the horns of Belzebub? It did not seem to me that you were tongue-tied as I came up, for you were chattering away like a flock of jays to my soldiers here."

The squire made an effort to overcome the growing irritation which this strange welcome caused him, spite of prudence. He laid succinctly before the rough soldier what he wanted of him.

"Athos, Porthos, and Aramis?" grumbled the corporal, plucking at his moustache in ill-humour. "Yes, I do remember all. Athos was a great nobleman, a count of some place which I have forgotten—who took the shine out of us with his sovereign style and magnificent manners—which did not save him from dying like an old dog, in his mansion in Blaisois."

"And, the other two?"

"Aramis and Porthos? Aramis was a priest who sometimes wore the musketeer's uniform; and Porthos was a beefeater, a giant——"

"Plague on it!" blurted out the young man, his voice trembling from his biting his lip till the blood ran. You are not lenient to your old companions-in-arms."

"Ah," growled the veteran with a hateful rancour. "They were the ones who enjoyed all the plums, while I, doomed to rust in a low position, have had to take my belt in two buckle-holes just to save my daily whet and crust."

"But this Aramis, and Porthos?"

"Oh, Aramis became a bishop, and Porthos a baron—royal favours that they hastened to requite with rebellion and ingratitude."

"What do you mean?"

"That the Bishop of Vannes and Baron du Vallon were mixed up with Foquet in the great conspiracy which led to that minister's arrest. They were two leaders who defended Belle-Isle against the king's men, and they slipped away during the hard knocks. I have seen the sentence which condemned the pair to death for high treason."

The squire had turned whiter than his shirt collar; from his eyes darted a flash which alarmed the spectators, and from his quivering lips issued this indignant protest:

"Porthos, a traitor—impossible! You lie!"

At this Bregy fairly roared. His forehead veins swelled like cords; his broad face from red turned to violet, and his hand grasped his swordhandle. The challenger acted in the same manner, but Champagnac and Escrivaux flung themselves between them.

"Gentlemen, think what you are about! drawing swords before a royal residence?"

The corporal put back his half-drawn blade into his sheath, and stepping up to his living goad, he stared at him and said with ill-contained ire, "Young man, you have spoken a word which makes you equal to me in age."

"I know what it entails," replied Joel, "and I am ready to stand my ground."

At this juncture, three o'clock sounded from the bell-tower. Four Swiss guards, with their corporal, came to

relieve the musketeers; when the change was made and the words given, the musketeer corporal said to his two sentries: "Messieurs d'Hericourt and Gace, go and leave your muskets in the guard-house. Then, join us in the forest. This stranger and I are going to take a stroll for our health. In emphasising the last word, he showed his tolerably good and strong teeth in a tigerish grin. "Messieurs d'Escrivaux and de Champagnac will also come with us. Each will come alone so as not to attract attention. All are to meet at the Saint Fiacre's Oak cross roads."

Together the duellists strode through the woods, welcome with their shade on that warm day. The musketeer took off his hat and puffed as he hummed an old marching song. The perspiration steamed on his forehead. It asserted that those about to die see all the events of their past life like a panorama. Joel saw Old Brittany again, the Giant's Grave, the sword which he wore, thrust through the mossy ground, and the face of his dying mother. But this time he wore a hard, stern expression, and he thought he heard her whispering:

"Defend the honour of your father!"

"We have arrived," said Bregy, significantly laying stress on his words, "this is the end of your journey."

In this clearing, covered with grass, several roads came to meet and form a star. In the centre rose an old oak, shrouded in ivy and lichen, and harbouring in one of its decayed knot-holes a plaster statue of Saint Fiacre, who is the gardeners' patron saint.

"We can begin the affair whenever you like," returned the Breton, with impatience.

"Take it easy, my boy," said the other jocularly.

"We must wait for our seconds, as I do not want it said that I butcher little children, like the ogre in the street-hawkers' ballads."

The four musketeers came up, each by a different path.

"Gentlemen," said the old swordsman, "two of you will kindly second our young fighting-cock, while the others stand by me. It is understood that you are not to interfere whatever takes place, save as the seconds' duty regulates, and testify at need that the fight was properly managed and that I despatched this gentleman according to the rules."

The soldiers silently obeyed. Escrivaux and Champagnac placed themselves by the Breton, and the other two remained near their superior. All four had a saddened air, and eyed our hero with unequivocal compassion, as he unsheathed his sword. It must be said that the sight of this heroic weapon, deftly wielded, had, however, a lively effect. His adversary alternately opened and closed his right hand to test the elasticity of the muscles, and stamp with his foot.

"I am ready for you, monsieur," said Joel.

The swordsman tossed his beaver on the sod and took out his sword. He bent his knee a couple of times in rehearsing a lunge, and sneeringly remarked:

"Do you not want to say anything to these gentlemen before we begin?"

"No."

"Then, look to it."

"I mean to."

In a deep silence, the two swords clashed and at once an oath was drawn from the corporal's lips for he had perceived that his task was not so easy if he expected to overcome the Breton easily. The latter had not winced under his attack, but stood like a statue with a mechanical arm playing the sword.

"Come, come, the boy has a spice of the fiend in him," muttered the old soldier. "I did intend only to lay him up for a few weeks. But now I shall be obliged to polish him right off."

Biting his moustache, he successively tried to thrust in carte and tierce, overstepping the fighting-line, and dealing the strokes with decisiveness and expertness

which alarmed the beholders, while he was astounded at their being met each time by the inflexible iron, for he believed he alone had the secret of these lunges—a tradition of the regiment. It was a sight of terrible and enchanting interest, with moving incidents which the lookers-on watched with anxious curiosity. The resistance, to which the old brawler was not habituated, surprised and irritated him. It caused him gradually to lose his science and coolness; giddiness affected his brain, obscured his sight and burdened his arm. He felt this defect and redoubled his impetuosity, and became frightful, with his foaming mouth and bloodshot eyes standing out from the sockets. At one time he shrank back on his guard, and then bounding forward, he delivered one of those high thrusts which would have penetrated the gorget of a foe and transfixed his throat; but Joel seemed to anticipate this stroke, old and of the Italian school of fence, for he dropped so swiftly that the sword passed straight over his head. As he rose, he and the baffled swordsman almost came in contact. He might with a shortened arm have stabbed him who was thus at his mercy, but he contented himself with giving him one of those looks which announce to an antagonist that he must expect no mercy when the time for execution comes.

By a reaction brought about by the different phases of the combat, Bregy now doubted himself and the other became confident, and this could be read on his face. To avoid a downward cut upon the sword, he leaped nimbly back but his left foot slipped, and by a natural movement Joel delivered a thrust as straight as a line and the sword disappeared in his adversary's breast. The latter remained on his feet for an instant, and tried to speak, but a flow of blood choked him. Reeling, he let go his sword to place both hands on his wound; then, like a tree uprooted, he dropped on the grass.

Joel leaned against a tree, with perspiration beading

the tip of each hair. His victory seemed a dream. He stared, affrighted, at his sword, crimsoned to the point, which he had also let drop, and at the corporal, lying on his back near the old oak. The distended eyes seemed to watch him, and a curse or some threat seemed hovering on his lips. Unwittingly he leaned towards him, when something like a sigh exhaled, and to the young man alone these words in the faintest of whispers reached the ear:

"It is the thrust of Porthos!"

Joel had revenged himself on the insulter of his father by a secret thrust known to but few in the regiment. The seconds exchanged a few words like men used to such deeds.

"Nothing can be done."

"Nothing, unless we notify the forest-keepers, who will carry the body into St. Germain's."

Champagnac and Escrivaux approached the conqueror of their unpleasant officer.

"Monsieur," said one, "you will do well in getting away from this place as soon as may be, as the royal edicts against duelling are strict, and the constabulary cannot be trifled with."

"Of course we may have never seen you." So said the other. "M. de Bregy must have been killed by some stranger, which is what we shall say when we are asked. But look! some one is coming. Go away! without losing a minute."

Joel stammered a few words by way of thanks. Taking up the avenging sword of his father, he mechanically wiped it with a handful of leaves, and replaced it in the scabbard. Then he departed with the step of a drunken man.

Friquet and Bonlarron were awaiting him for supper when he found his way to them—he hardly knew how.

"By my faith," exclaimed the Parisian, when the recital was ended; "I should have done the same thing. I should have made the braggart skip into the air

so high that the tower of St. Jacques would have been seen under his flying carcase."

As the fatal duellist flagged in appetite, the soldier-landlord emitted this consolatory maxim:

"The first time you kill a man it always makes you a little nervous, but it is only the first corpse that counts. It is nothing when you get used to it."

CHAPTER XII

AN AWKWARD PREDICAMENT

ADJOINING the landing place of the Anjou Quay stood the grand mansion built for Lord Nicholas Gruhin, and afterwards the property of Lauzun. But it was taken at the present season for his Parisian residence by his Eminence the Duke of Almada, ambassador of his Catholic Majesty, Charles II., King of Spain and the Indies.

Aramis was seated in his study, wrapped in a silk gown, before a desk loaded with papers. He had just finished reading the following letter.

"MY LORD; I have to inform you that the king will shortly return from Lille to St. Germain's, and that it is necessary to make preparations accordingly. The marchioness seems indeed more than ever assured of the power of her charms and the success of her ambitious designs. I hear that she has secretly boasted of a prediction lately made to her which, if it come to pass, will ruin our hopes and projects completely. A fortune-teller of the Palais Royal suburb announced to her that Louis XIV. would shortly be free to wed again and would, by marrying her, raise her to the supreme rank in the realm. It is, therefore, necessary to produce at the court the counterpart to this noxious influ-

ence—the person who will eclipse her. Will your Excellency deign to take measures consequently and consider me on all occasions the most faithful, devoted and respectful of servants,

“BOISLAURIER.

Warm as was the evening, a high fire blazed in the ample fire-place, in carved marble, before which the desk was placed. Almada crushed the letter into a ball, and flung it into the fire where it was consumed in an instant. Then, settling back in the armchair, he seemed to allow meditation to absorb him. In a short time he roused himself and murmured:

“Upon my word, Boislaurier is right; things shall be hurried on. As the mountain will not come to us, we must go to it.”

Thereupon he sounded a bell and an attendant appeared.

“See if Esteban has returned and send him to me at once.”

In a few minutes the individual inquired for was before his master; a fine, sharp Spaniard; he bowed to the old lord.

“Well, what news?” demanded the latter.

“I have the honour to bring your Excellency the information which I was charged to obtain.”

“Very well. Speak—I am all attention.”

“The young lady whom I followed dwells with an old relative whose infirmities keep her indoors, in the Rue Tournelles district.”

“Proceed.”

“She comes forth in the mornings to call on various lawyers—proctors, judges, counsellors——”

“Go on.”

“In the evenings, she goes to worship to the parish church of St. Paul’s.”

“How have you learnt that?”

“I heard her say to an old beggar-woman, in the

porch, as she dropped a coin into her hand: 'You may expect the same regularly about this time as I shall come here daily.' "

After a pause the ambassador asked:

"Have you not at hand some bold fellow devoid of principle, who will do any kind of work if he be paid well?" He added, smiling as the lackey was about to offer himself; "I am not mistrusting your delicacy; but private motives prevent me confiding the mission to a member of my household."

"Your Excellency will be well suited," went on the Spaniard eagerly; "I have met the very fellow you want."

"Ah, how nicely things fit in! What are the qualifications of this rogue for the work?"

"He styles himself Captain Cordbuff; he is an old friend, for we served the king together."

"In the navy?"

Esteban shuddered, for he and the highwayman had pulled at the same oar as galley-slaves for the king of Spain.

"How long can we depend upon him?"

"As long as the purse of his employer holds good."

"Then I may call upon him to do me some slight service?"

"Your Excellency may have him at a reduction from the market price. The poor scamp arrives from the country, where he was badly treated, to judge by his tattered clothing. He will throw into the bargain three companions, whom he drags at his heels—they look upon him as their captain. All four were the victims of a dishonest comrade."

"What, dishonesty among thieves! what is the world coming to? but a truce to all this. Bring me this ~~valorous~~ captain at once."

"Tomorrow, early, he will await the command of your Excellency."

"You are a good fellow, Esteban. Continue to show

the same zeal. My treasurer will often want to see you."

On dismissing his valet, the ambassador wrote some lines in a kind of diary carried with him, and sank into a reverie.

A smile came to his thin lips and gradually became more and more bitter. "Heigho!" he sighed in fatigue. "How D'Artagnan, Athos and Porthos would look with contempt on the webs I am spinning now. Those valiant champions of the wronged and oppressed queens and lovers, waged manly warfare and measured themselves with such combatants as Richelieu, Cromwell and the crafty Mazarin: they fought for fair ladies and would-be kings, under the flash of swords: they rode desperately; they crossed the seas like Perseus and Jason in the fables."

He had partly risen in his seat, and a spark of fire danced under the curtain of his eye. The memory of dashing deeds of days gone by galvanised the worn-out frame and awakened the musketeer in the diplomatist. But this return of youth was of a short duration. The expression of mocking wisdom, his second nature, soon replaced the furtive gleam of enthusiasm on the aged countenance.

With a broken laugh, Aramis continued:

"But times have altered. The great conspiracies in which a plotter risked his head on the block of Chalais, Cinq-Mars and Montmorency, have given place to domestic intrigues, where the disgrace of a favourite or the ruin of a courtier is arranged behind my lady's fan or the minister's fire-screen. And this hand, which has been mighty enough to shake a throne, is reduced to push court puppets to and fro as though they were pawns on the chess-board."

Clasping his slender, white hands over the silk dressing-gown, he resumed, while his features reflected a normal conscience.

"All things considered, is it any fault of mine if

there is no longer an Olympus to scale? I am more able to climb a molehill. Anyhow, the interests I guard are important. 'Sdeath! as my poor D'Artagnan used to say, the importance of the end justifies the method.'

And with this Jesuitical plea, by his position over the Sons of Loyala most appropriate in his mouth, he soon after retired to a sound repose. Not long after he had breakfasted in the Spanish mode, he had an interview with our old acquaintance Cordbuff.

As a result, the valourous Condor, with a couple of his old troop, but no longer mounted, might have been seen in the dust prowling in the neighbourhood of the Church of St. Paul's.

Inside, some old women were listening to evening prayers: Mdlle. du Tremblay was kneeling in the Chapel of the Virgin.

When she approached the holy water font, the worshippers might have noticed, if their sight had been keen enough to pierce her veil, that she blushed. Near the same basin stood a young man, our friend Joel, who dipped his fingers in the blessed water and offered it to the lady. Thus their hands touched. Together, they descended the porch steps.

This discovery of the male escort to the lady did not meet the taste of Condor and his comrades; but their orders were imperative, and their need of gain most urgent. Summoning all their courage, they glided after the pair; two of them crossed the street and went to join still another, lurking in a doorway, wrapped in a dull-coloured cloak and covered with a black felt hat. The third continued to follow the happy couple, who would not have noticed if a regiment were at their heels.

"How now," inquired the watcher, of the others as they met.

"Well, you are quite right, captain," responded one of the spies, "it is the Breton peasant with whom we had the little incident on the Saumur road."

"And the girl is also one of the travellers by the coach."

"It will be a double prize," observed Condor, grinning. "At length I have it in my power to be even with that saucy creature's scorn and the brutality of the rustic."

"Do not be so sure about that," replied one of the twain, "you have acted wisely in having reinforcements; the pretty bird has beak and claws to defend herself."

"So," added the second, "and she will not fail to make good use of them."

"What does that matter?" sneered the Colonel of the Royal Marauders. "Have we not a gag to prevent her making too much noise. As for the clown, we have ten good blades who will soon do for him."

With the tone of a general arranging his army in line of battle, he went on: "Where is your comrade, Pickpurse?"

"Following the pair."

"Where is the coach?"

"By the church."

"And the rest of our men?"

"With the coach."

"And now, to work! Mind, no nonsense; it is the special order of the noble lord who employs us. Take your time and do the thing well."

For several days Aurore had been attending vespers at St. Paul's, and twice Joel had had the pleasure of escorting her home. But he had done it by keeping at a little distance. On this occasion he made so bold as to walk by her side. As she eyed him with a kindly smile, he muttered:

"Are we going to part so soon?" in a tone of entreaty. "I do so want to speak with you."

"I am of the same mind, my friend," she answered without hesitation, and holding out her hand to him,

upon which an expression of delight shone on his face.

They turned into the Rue Petit-Musc.

"Let me take your arm," said Aurore; "I am frightened."

"Not while I am with you, I hope," said Joel.

"Oh," she replied, "I know by experience that I may rely on your strength and courage: but this part is so lonely, and night is falling fast."

Indeed, there were few persons out; the night promised a storm and the sky was overcast. The girl leaned on the arm of her protector. With ecstasy he contemplated her delicious loveliness which the increasing gloom softened and caused to appear more heavenly. They walked but slowly, keeping close to each other. To the Breton's lips the words pressed, but held them back in order to do nothing but listen to those from the voice which thrilled him to the core.

"Well, have you commenced your inquiries," she asked. "I am sure you have, as you are a man of immediate action. Do you still count upon the success for which I pray every day?"

The youth felt great embarrassment. Ought he to inform the lady of what had happened when he went out to St. Germain? He durst not.

Still, as falsehood was repugnant to his frank and straightforward nature, he answered the question by putting another.

"And your steps, mademoiselle, do they bid fair to turn out happily?"

"Alas!" she sighed, with a shake of the head, "I am not an adept at begging and praying favours. The art is a sealed letter to me of obtaining general support by reiterated supplications, and I have the great flaw of being proud. Ah, would that I alone were at stake, and that the welfare of these children——"

"You would give up the task!"

"I certainly should, and leave town the next day."

"Leave town?" repeated the other.

"What else can you expect? the noise makes me dizzy. I am frightened by all sorts of things. Horror and pity are inspired in me by the mingling of passions and lusts which clash in the streets, where the tall houses hide the heavens. Then, again, I feel myself so lonely here, deprived of all support and defence. Oh, how much better I should prefer to go home to the country and dwell far, very far from the town? My country is your own, too, where the wild rose and the golden furze mingle on the cliffs and the boundless strand! and their scents blend with the gentle breeze from the ocean."

"Would you be content to dwell there by yourself?" questioned the lover, with a tremulous voice.

"I should esteem myself happy above all women if I had beside me one whom my heart had chosen."

"Oh, yes," he muttered, "you mean some grand nobleman who would make you a lady."

"Oh, no," returned Aurore, softly, and shaking her head. "I am poor, and I have confessed that I am proud, but this pride prevents me accepting anything from the man who weds me save the wedding-ring." Her voice became haughtier, and she added. "But as a daughter of a noble, I am bound not to marry beneath my line."

"Ah, me!"

She pressed his arm with hers, and in a grave and penetrative voice demanded:

"Why do you sigh? I am patient and we are young. Can we not wait in confidence until heaven shall have blessed our efforts, or that, in default of your finding out your sire's name, you make one for yourself?"

"Good heavens," ejaculated Joel, "is it possible that you have guessed my secret?"

They had reached the Celestins Wharf, where there

stood a bench by a tree. The girl took a seat upon it, saying:

"Come, sit beside me?"

He obeyed and she continued: "I believe that you love me."

He raised his eyes and met hers fixed upon him, and then hers were cast down from his being so ardent.

"Yes, and I love you," continued she, "to learn which I had no need to hear the tale from your lips; I had but to listen to the beatings of my own heart."

Roused into a fever, our hero said: "I respect no one in the world as I do you, and I should die were you to wed another."

In the brief silence a slight stir was heard, which may have been the approaching wind: the storm was nearing them and the darkness augmented. But the lovers saw nothing of either phase; they had no consciousness of the advanced hour or of the thunder growling in the distance. Joel had grasped the small hands, which quivered in his tender hold.

"Aurore," he kept on repeating, "Aurore, you are my love! My hope and all I long for in the time to come! You are my life entire!"

A heartrending scream interrupted him, for the girl had seen a dark form emerge from the shadow of the tree. An arm was raised and the butt-end of a heavy pistol came down on the young man's head. He fell, stunned.

As if this was a signal, three men swiftly darted out from the same covert, and rushed upon Mdlle. du Tremblay. At the same time, a coach, drawn by two horses, came out of one of the alleys ending on the bankside. The three ruffians hurried her away towards it.

She resisted, and shrieked:

"Help, help!"

This appeal of distress worked a miracle. Joel sprang to his feet, like the bull does, sometimes, when

the axe has blunted the senses, not fatally paralysed them. The thick felt of his shaggy Breton hat had broken the force of the blow. By the pale gleam of a stray lamp he had a peep at the ravishers, and he bounded upon them, with his sword in his grip. On seeing him swoop, like the charge of a cavalier, one of the three ruffians left his comrades and also bared the sword.

"No passage this way," said he.

"The Colonel of the Royal Marauders!" exclaimed Joel.

"I am your man," replied Cordbuff, darting the steel point at his face: "I am going to mark you this time again where my pistol ball left the trace."

This was only a fencer's trick; for, instead of the blade approaching his eyes, Joel had to parry a lunge which might have cut him in halves.

"Ah, the gallows-bird that you are," growled the Breton, "you are not worthy being slain by my noble sword." And, reversing the weapon, he used it as a club and with a weighty blow nearly split the bandit's skull, and he rolled in the mud. In one bound the victor had cleared him, and in two more reached his accomplices. With a cut, he left the Plucker howling, and with a thrust, he sent Pillager into a doorway: Aurore had no vile hand on her now. She clung to his neck.

"You have saved me," she said. "Oh, God help us!" she almost immediately cried. "We are lost."

At the same moment, a dozen armed ruffians, who were called "the Ferocities," disbanded soldiers who led a vagrant life, seemed to issue from the bowels of the earth, and made directly for our hero.

"Curs," said he, "well for you that I am not alone!"

Instead of rushing headlong into their midst, he took up the girl as though she were a feather, and rapidly turning, he began a retreat. The whole band started

in pursuit. Fortunately the first blast of the coming storm lifted the dust into a cloud and shrouded them in its blinding whirls. This, for the instant, checked their speed, and that space sufficed to give the fugitive a reasonable advance.

Large drops of rain began to fall.

Joel ran like an ostrich. Thinking that to save his dear one, he should not shrink from proceedings which the emergency would win pardon for, he took the girl upon his left shoulder and held her from falling with the arm that side; she did not stir. His right arm was free for his sword. The priceless burden did not slacken his furious stride; if anything, it spurred him on in its giddy swiftness. They who followed were inveterate. He heard them breathlessly hastening, with the clash of weapons and formidable oaths. But our champion was fortunately of the build to accomplish feats of this description. He was nimble, spite of his somewhat burly frame. It was not for a poor result that he had trained his muscles in hunting on the plains at Belle-Isle, and in running over the sand even in the tempestuous nights under the thunderpeals.

The storm was at its height. The ground rang under the rattling hail. On every hand echoes hurried back the roar of thunder. But the Breton had been in a worse one in his native place.

In the Equinoctial gales the ocean-rollers come in upon them with the howls of Titans trying to scale the cliffs. He strode on, undismayed, with a regular pulse and an even respiration.

But not so with the robbers: unsteady by drink and carousals, they floundered and stumbled: they choked for breath! at every instant one stopped short. Joel was bareheaded as he fled, his long hair streaming out on the wind, wet with the rain and his perspiration. He crossed one bridge—then another. He threaded one, two, three streets and with a final effort, reached the

end of the outer ward beyond the old City limits. Here he paused to rest on a corner-post, and listened.

He could hear nothing of his pursuers. He uttered a shout of triumph.

"Thank heaven, we are safe! Mademoiselle, with the help of heaven, I believe we have nothing to fear."

Aurore made no reply; she remained motionless.

"Mercy on us, is she dead?" gasped the Breton.

With anguish he touched her pulse, and he found that it still beat.

"She has only fainted," he sighed with relief. "The same sort of thing as she experienced on the Saumur highway. But," as he sustained her on his knee, "she must be attended to, or this drenching rain will be the death of her. What a place—not a soul about! All the doors and windows closed! I do not even know where I am," he added, in despair, while his eye questioned the shadows that thickened around.

Suddenly a flash of lightning glared: out of the dark loomed the house before which he had paused, and the brave youth uttered an outcry of joy.

He recognised the building as the Grey House. Only a few days previously, he had escorted home the three ladies who had asked for his arm, on the Pont Neuf. Filling him with light and cheer, came the remembrance of the sentence which one of the three had pronounced as the most grateful for his service.

"If ever you have need of my aid, do not shrink from knocking at this door, and asking for Françoise d'Aubigny."

CHAPTER XIII

LIKE A QUEEN

THE anxiety of Françoise was for the royal children whose early training was entrusted to her. She feared that the storm would disturb them. At every thunder-clap which shook the windows she glanced towards their cribs with uneasy affection. But the three children did not stir; innocence protected them in the battle of the elements. So the lady resumed her reading. At times, interrupting herself, she put down the book and pencil with which she was making notes, to muse, leaning back in her easy chair, with her gaze on vacancy, and her serious lips fluttering: "Queen—that woman repeated that I was to be a queen." Still a smile of incredulity curled her mouth, although a ray of hope lighted her eyes. She shook her head as though to dispossess it of the haunting thought. In the midst of one of these tormenting reveries, the royal governess abruptly started, for a heavy hand hammered with the knocker of her door.

"A knock at this hour—what can it mean?"

A few minutes having passed, a servant came in.

"What is the matter, Honorin?" questioned the mistress.

"Madame, it is a young gentleman who wishes to speak to you."

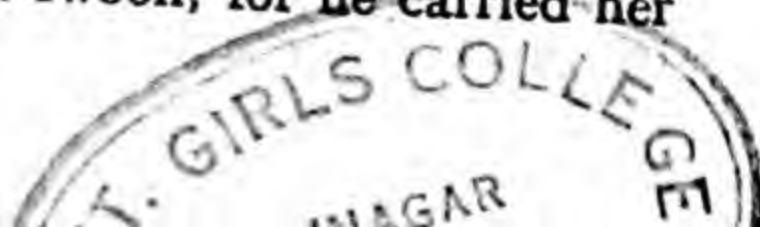
"A young gentleman?"

"Whom I remember as the one who guarded you and the marchioness hither, and whom her ladyship ordered the carriage out to take him home."

A passing colour glowed on the lady's face.

"Oh, that brave fellow——"

"He has with him a young lady—very pretty, upon my word, and seeming in a swoon, for he carried her in his arms."



"This is strange," said the governess, rising. "However, conduct them into my oratory, where I will see them presently."

When she entered the room, Joel, who had been anxiously waiting, took a step towards her with a supplicatory gesture and said, as he pointed to Mdlle. du Tremblay, whom he had placed upon a sofa.

"Oh, for pity's sake, lady, help her, and I will repay you!"

On beholding the girl, with the treasure of her hair flowing over her shoulders and streaming with wet, the governess could not restrain an exclamation of astonishment.

"Quick, call Nicole and Suzette," she said, turning to the footman, who had followed her. "Let the bed in the Blue Room be warmed. And bring me my travelling medicine-chest."

"I must explain to you, lady," began the Breton, again advancing.

"Not just now," she interposed. "We have no time, we must revive her without delay."

Her two chambermaids having come in, she proceeded:

"Carry this lady into the Blue Room, where you will take off her wet garments and put her to bed. I will see among my remedies which will be most fit to bring her to consciousness. You stay here, sir," she went on to the deliverer. "I shall return as soon as the patient will no longer need my presence. Then you can acquaint me with the circumstances."

Nearly an hour elapsed, which seemed half a century to the waiting hearer. But at last the mistress of the Grey House appeared.

"Keep up a good heart," she said to his mute challenge. "Mdlle. du Tremblay—for her name came out in the babble of fever—is asleep. I have given her a calming potion. But she must have been overcome by great terror and——"

"Indeed."

Our hero rapidly narrated to the governess the scenes which we have described. When he arrived at the sequel of his mad race through the storm and in the dark streets, she declared:

"Verily, this is a strange adventure. I now comprehend the poor girl's trouble from which I have sought to spare her by administering the soothing draught. Fear not: she will be calm on waking, in a safe place and with her defender by her. If it should not be so, I will not hesitate to have recourse to medical science and call in Fagon."

"Fagon? oh, a doctor?"

"A physician—the new royal physician."

"Oh, then he will save her! For indeed, lady, if he should fail, I should no longer wish to live, and would have only one thing further to crave of you: point me out the nearest road to the river——"

The royal governess shook her finger at him in affectionate remonstrance.

"I repeat to you that the young lady is not in danger of death—at least, such is my belief: what she feels is the consequence of her high-strung character, excessively nervous, it strikes me."

"You are right in what you say," said the Breton, "for I have seen her before similarly indisposed."

"And then, the upset of the mind yielded, I suppose, to the repose of the body. So will it be to-day. Sleep is the sovereign remedy for such accidents."

"Heaven hear you, who bring to me hope and to her health."

He endeavoured to take her hand, but she shrank back from this manifestation of gratitude. As the squire stared at her in surprise, she resumed, to shift the topic of conversation and give herself a countenance:

"At present, M. Joel, it seems to me time to think about yourself."

"You call me Joel?" exclaimed the Breton with pleasure. "Then you know me?"

"Did you not mention it to any of my companions?"

"And you did not forget it!"

"No more than your kind assistance."

"Oh, a trifle! It is I who should thank you. Still, as you do me the favour to interest yourself in me——"

"I wish to point out that, as your clothing seems soaked and muddy——"

"Very likely. It is all on account of the rain—and I did not notice it."

"You cannot remain in such a state——"

"For fear of spoiling your carpets—that is true. I am as much out of place here as though I were a river——"

"No, no," she protested, "I am not talking of carpets, but of yourself who need dry clothes."

"Pooh, a turn before the fire and a glass of wine to warm me through and through, and I am myself again."

"How thoughtless of me," said the governess, smiling. "Be good enough to follow me. We can talk as well over the wine you reminded me to offer."

Joel was soon seated in the dining-room, between the fireplace, where a good fire was blazing, and the table, which Honorin had abundantly loaded: but the satisfaction of his hunger did not dispel the cloud darkening his brow, usually so complacent and smiling. While he was feasting, the hostess had spoken with her cold, sane, pitiless reason.

"So, you are in love with Mdlle. du Tremblay? you really love her, in full sincerity, in your inner self? it is neither a surprise of the senses nor a freak of youth? You love her so dearly that you would sacrifice your fortune to her if the proposal arose?"

"I would not only sacrifice my fortune but my lot in paradise."

"A Breton talking of bartering his salvation," she said mirthfully. "Good gracious, this is getting serious. Does Mdlle. du Tremblay return the sentiment?"

"She has given me the great joy of authorising me to believe so."

A slight cloud of vexation shaded the questioner's brow.

"On my honour, this opens like a romance," she said. "But before the *finale* be reached, what disappointments, crosses and proofs! In the first place, you have a rival."

"A rival?"

"How do you account for the attempt at abduction from which the fair Aurore escaped only by your intervention? I vow that there is a thwarted swain in the background—some dangerous personage, no doubt, who does not recoil from the most expeditious practices—" She spoke with more emphasis, and looked hard at him; "For the first time, the method failed: but that does not say they may not succeed on the next attempt?"

Our hero dropped upon his plate the breastbone of the cold fowl—the rest of the succulent bird had already gone the way of all (poultry) flesh.

"What, do you think these scoundrels are in hire of some one loftier?"

"Come," she replied, with some bitterness, "do you yourself think that one will easily renounce the desire to secure a girl so accomplished as your idol?"

"Out upon him!" growled the youth, lowering his head like the bull about to charge; "I must kill this man."

"Do you know him?"

"I shall seek until I find him."

"A very problematical result. Has he not as much reason to keep in the background as you to discover

him? May he not have at his hand the means most plentiful to elude you? Besides, what would you reach? He is doubtless a rich and powerful man, who has an army of cut-throats at his back, and you stand alone, except your sword."

This logic choked Joel, who drank a cup of wine to clear his throat.

"In the meanwhile," proceeded the lady, dwelling on her words as if she wished to convince her auditor of the desperate nature of the situation, "Mdlle. du Tremblay is no longer in safety in her lodging in the Rue Tournelles, do you think? For my part, I do not suppose so. The dwelling must be known to the unknown ravisher, who will concentrate his plots around that point, till, sooner or later, the prey falls into them. For you will not always be at hand, like a guard of honour, and the bedridden relative who gives her shelter does not appear to me able to help her."

"But," remonstrated the squire, "above the rich and mighty, there is a law which protects the weak and oppressed."

"My young sir," said she with ironical compassion, "it is plain that you have recently arrived from the rural districts, for the law here is what the Lieutenant of Police, Lareyine, makes it. He is said to be straightforward; but is it likely he would take your side, and your Aurore's, two youths from the provinces, without credit or influence—against a rival of your antagonist's rank? From the high-handed manner in which he acts, I should say he is a great noble, assured he may brave justice, or a rich one able to bribe it."

Joel rose perplexed.

"Woe is me!" he sighed. "You see that I must leap with her over the nearest bridge——"

This heartrending outburst of his affection was so deep that the hearer was thrilled to her inmost being.

"How he adores her!" she thought. "He will kill her sooner than lose her, and then slay the villain,

however high. In all ways, death impends. But he must not be lost—so young a man, who, like myself, belongs to the future. Squire Joel," she called out as he staggered towards the door, "return and be seated."

As his only reply was a mad shake of the fist, she ran to him at the door, and, leading him back, forced him to take his seat.

"You are but a boy to throw away your life like this. If I were your friend, we might invent some means together to extricate you from this quandary. There must be a way when there is a will. So there is!—do you recall the lady whom you served as cavalier—one of my companions?"

"The marchioness?" mechanically queried the Breton.

"Yes, the Marchioness de Montespan," and she studied on the young man's face the impression made by the revelation, or she sought for it, for there was none.

Nothing was there but his personal distress.

"Does the title convey no information to you?"

"By my faith, no—is there anything particular about it?"

"Surely you are not ignorant who the marchioness is——"

"I saw that she was very bewitching and obliging."

"Is that all?"

"Yes."

"Now, do you mean to say that you do not know her position in the court?"

"Oh, she holds a position at court, does she? One of the queen's ladies, I suppose?"

"How furious the proud Athenais would be to hear that! Collect your thoughts. Of what were you two conversing as you came along, she on your arm, from the New Bridge hither?"

The youth repeated the dialogue very accurately.

"It would be so," muttered the auditress. "Heudicourt is right—the woman wants to captivate you. At all events," she went on, "you did not confide to her the name of your beloved?"

He shook his head, and she approved.

"Good—we have a chance of success."

"Success in what?"

"In the first place, in shielding your sweetheart from the pursuit of your rival."

"Is that possible?"

"Listen to me: the Marchioness de Montespan is—how will I explain it? a great friend of the king—his greatest, best friend—up to the present time," she said to herself. "The king can refuse her nothing," she proceeded, for his ear, "a matter of give and take. Now, if my lady agrees to take Mdle. du Tremblay under her wing——"

"I see," broke in Joel, encouraged. "All you want is this protection, which I will ask of the lady."

"You?"

"Of course! the great lady is not so haughty as you say. We chatted together on the same frank footing. I will declare to her that there is nobody on the earth but my Aurore——"

"Mind you do nothing of the kind, you foolish fellow!"

"Why not? She showed herself interested in me."

"That is the very reason."

"I fail to understand."

"There is no necessity of your understanding."

"There, you are ridiculing me again," murmured the youth.

"Do not be angry with me. I have not had such fun since I lost my poor husband. But your innocence is laughable."

"What!"

"Listen, then, I will myself speak for you to the marchioness. I beg you not to interrupt me. I have

been so much somebody's ward that I am happy to play the fairy godmother to somebody else. In the first place, Mdlle. du Tremblay can stay here until recovered from her alarm and ready for me to conduct her to St. Germain, where I will lodge her by Madame de Montespan. Under the roof of the royal residence, her unknown pursuer will not dare to renew his attacks. Hereafter, we shall see what is to be done. I have your happiness in my head, and whenever I make up my mind to anything, it comes to pass. In acting thus, I am not purely giving the man of her choice to your adored darling; but a rarity worthy of pairing off with Oger the Danish Knight for wildness and for chastity with Scipio Africanus."

"Oh, madame, how kind you are, and how heartily I thank you."

But though she let him kiss her hands, like the queen she dreamed to become, she receded, and in a calm voice said:

"M. Joel, we will now part company. I must return to our interesting invalid and the children. Besides, it is getting late, and you must be fatigued with your exertions. Take the necessary repose. Good-night!"

Joel slept in an easy chair by the chimney-corner till an advanced hour in the morning. After some time a maid-servant came to usher him into the room where Mdlle. du Tremblay was.

Aurore was attacked with violent prostration, as was revealed in the lustre of her eyes, the purple tint on her cheekbones and the relaxation of her muscles. When she woke, after a bad night, and asked where she was, Widow Scarron had bent over her, and in a most motherly voice replied:

"Do not talk, my child. At this moment the effort to listen and to speak may be fatal to you. Know that you are surrounded by friends." Pointing to her defender, who entered on tiptoe, anxious and excited, she added: "You see that I am not deceiving you."

Your champion is here. Friends have undertaken to shield your head from all danger from whatever quarter: from the malady which keeps you in bed as from the criminal plots which threatened your honour."

Joel knelt beside the bed and took the burning hand and saluted it with a reverent and gentle kiss. She responded by softly and affectionately pressing his hand, and she would have spoken; but the Widow Scarron again intervened:

"Let me once more urge perfect quiet, until the doctor arrives. I have sent a messenger to St. Germain to bring Dr. Fagon," she continued to Joel. "I expect him to arrive soon, but you must not meet him here."

"Do you wish me to go away?"

"Yes; I want you to take a message from Mdlle. du Tremblay who lives with an aged relative."

"Old Madame de la Bassetiere."

"Exactly; she must have been greatly frightened by this event, and it is necessary to set her at ease respecting the fate of her young kinswoman, and ask her approval of the measures we intend to take for her welfare."

Aurore, in spite of her state, did not lose a word of this colloquy. Her look seemed to say to the royal governess: "I thank you for thinking of everything!" and she also seemed to say to Joel; "Hasten, my friend, for mercy's sake!"

"But I shall see you again?" asked the Breton.

Widow Scarron pushed him gently towards the door, saying:

"Yes, you may come back. Any evening. Is not your presence a remedy, perhaps better than any Dr. Fagon can order. Now begone. Do you not see that as long as you stay, our patient will not close her eyes."

CHAPTER XIV

AS IN THE 17TH CENTURY

WHEN Joel reached the Rue St. Antoine, he remarked extraordinary animation at about the middle of it, by the Place Royale. Children were running to and fro and screaming; foot passengers stopped and formed groups; the storekeepers came out of their shops, and the windows were noisily opened to make room for curious faces. Our astonished friend inquired what had happened of an honest cobbler whose stall stood in the corner of the Rue Val St. Catherine.

"Master," responded he, "an arrest has taken place over yonder in the tavern of the Rue Pas-de-Mule—an important capture."

"Indeed?"

"We saw the officer and six guards march past a short time ago. Look, it seems to me that they are coming back."

Nothing gathers a crowd so quickly in a city as a police arrest. The mob thickened on both sides of the way. From the mouths of the spectators a murmur arose, from which these sentences vaguely stood out, so to say:

"It is a murderer—a thief—a forger." "No, it was sacrilege—arson." "Say, rather, a conspirator—a rebel!" "You are all wrong, stupids! it is a poisoner."

In the midst of this uproar, the armed force marched onward with a slowness due to the hindrance caused by the mob. The police officer who preceded it tried to keep back the inquisitive spectators who stood in the way. His six archers were old soldiers, burly and ponderous, who overshadowed by their bulk the prisoner whom they escorted. Nevertheless, he did not fail to try, by drawing himself to his full height, to see

something of what was going on. At the same time, he was not a bit discomfited, ashamed or embarrassed. Carrying himself haughtily, his head held back disdainfully, his hat cocked over his ear and his hand on his hip, he nodded to the male bystanders and winked and smiled to the ladies.

When he strutted by Joel, the latter exclaimed:

"Friquet!"

The mannikin did not hear the word in the disturbance, or perceive the speaker, he was concerned about himself. A girl who was staring had cried out this expression of compassion: "Oh, the poor little man!" and the little Parisian testily retorted:

"Little, indeed! you impertinent drab! you are pretty watchmen that you let hussies insult a cavalier of my rank and quality under your protection."

Friquet, the protégé of Colbert's kinsman, arrested! The Breton, seized with irresistible curiosity, ran to the Rue Pas-du-Mule. On seeing him come up, Master Bonlarron, who was making a heated speech in the midst of a crowd of neighbours, hastened to quit them to hurry up to the young man with gestures of alarm.

"You rash fellow," he said, pushing him inside his house. "Why have you come back? hide yourself! let nobody know you are here."

"What? why should I hide?"

"Because they are after you!"

"After me?"

"Decidedly. It is by providence that the police were put off the scent, for they have been fooled—they never depart from their usual practices. And they have captured the little Parisian instead of you. Yet there is a difference certainly. But those men can never see clear."

"Arrested in my stead?" said Joel. "What do you mean by that? How comes Friquet to be taken for me?"

"Here it is in a nut-shell. This morning, as I was

breakfasting, I saw an officer come up with half a dozen archers of the guard, of whom he posted two at the door. The others went in with him. I naturally asked what was the matter. Information, said they, and I was not to be chary about it, as they came in the king's name. I was overpowered with the honour, and begged them to be seated, and show how I might be agreeable to his Most Christian Majesty.

“ ‘ You must frankly answer our questions.’

“ ‘ I will answer to any amount so long as I do not get myself into any trouble.’

“ ‘ You have a guest freshly arrived from the country?’

“ ‘ Better than that—I have two.’

“ ‘ We mean the one who has just been out to St. Germain?’

“ ‘ Do you tell me one has gone out to St. Germain? Good! travel shapes young men—when it does not knock them out of shape.’

“ ‘ The postmaster has sworn to letting him have a horse, and the innkeeper at Pecq that he left him there.’

“ ‘ Left the horse, eh? that proves he is an honest young man, anyhow.’

“ About this time, the officer perceived that I was playing with him, and he pulled a long face; he levelled his glances at me like shots out of a blunderbuss.

“ ‘ Friend you are merry,’ he sneered.

“ ‘ Always when I am not bested by bad customers and have cause to be glum.’

“ ‘ We are not talking of your character, but of your lodger's. Where is he now?’

“ ‘ How do I know? he is not here, that is certain, for he forgot to come home last night.’

“ ‘ Are you sure?’

“ ‘ As sure as this is a glass of wine that I am drinking to your health.’

“ ‘ Rogue, you are trying to deceive me. The bird

is in its nest. The police agent who was charged to watch him, saw a light in his room last night, and everything leads us to believe that he has not left."

"If he has not gone out you had better go and take him."

"Whereupon they went upstairs with a good deal of caution. After a while they came down with M. Friquet. The brave lad did not pretend to deny himself, or rather deny you. He marched along between the halberds like the king among his guards. That dwarf ought to be seven foot high, to behave so handsomely as to let himself be locked up for a friend. The only thing is to see if the police and the justices like the fun of the jest."

"But where are they taking him?"

"I asked one of the archers and he said that the usual way was to bring him before the Superintendent of Police at the Châtelet prison."

"Ah!"

"A magistrate with a heart of the same stone as the building he sits in."

"Well," said Joel, settling his hat on firmly: "I would like to know the road to the Châtelet."

"What!" ejaculated the innkeeper, starting; "you never mean to——"

"I am going to appear before the bar of justice."

"Why, you silly fellow," said the veteran, "you cannot be in your right senses. It is about that confounded duel—and the king will be enraged—killing his musketeer, and in a royal forest!"

"I reproach myself in no way, and I shall await the result of my trial without fear."

"But you forget you have broken the law."

"If the law," tranquilly returned the squire, "if the law punishes gentlemen for obeying the dictates of honour, then it is the law-maker who ought to be punished. Do you refuse to tell me the way to the prison?" he added.

"It will be pointing out your doom."

"Then I must ask some one else. I do not want M. Friquet to think that I would profit by his devotion longer than I could help."

"Nonsense! do not bother about him—he will slip out easily. A Parisian always comes out of a scrape with glory—if it be only vain-glory!"

The other frowned.

"Do you, an old hero, suggest such a dastard act to me?"

"What I suggest is, that, without losing a minute, you make for the St. Honore Gate, quit Paris and take yourself off to Brittany, where you will not be sought for."

"You cannot be speaking seriously. If you were, you would be insulting me so that only your age would protect you."

"You stubborn-headed boy," returned the tavern-keeper, stamping his foot, "are you attached to nothing—is there nobody you love on earth?"

"Oh!" interrupted Joel, with a flow of all the feeling in his breast. "It is cruel of you to place a man between love and duty. Not another word—make way," he said with an imperious wave of the hand. "Farewell!"

"No," said the old sergeant, throwing himself before him; "you shall not make such a fool of yourself—you shall not go! I will not have you go. Come, come, the matter of it is that I like you," went on the veteran, with his rough voice and hardened face softened by tender emotion, "you might be a son of mine. It is only three days since we met, but it is just the same as though we had gone through a campaign together. You are an old campaigner, in fact, for you are satisfied with everything—wine, meat, bread, the waiter and the host. You have first class health and a good appetite. And you can fence like a professional! All this, to moulder in jail! all this, to end on the

scaffold—I may say for killing a good-for-nothing sot, who owes even his landlord for liquor enjoyed! an old rat—to be paid for as though he were new. I oppose your going. And have a care how you play with my patience. Zounds! I have it in me, to take my rapier down from the hooks and pin you to the wall to prevent you committing a folly which I regard as suicide!”

Joel could but smile at this singular way of preventing self-murder.

“ Mine host,” he said, “ you are an honest man, and you must forgive me for laying a hand on you—but your obstinacy drives me to it.”

At the same time, he seized the old man by the collar, but only in fun, as if to drag him away from the doorway where he had planted himself; as the worthy Bonlarron threw out both arms to repel the attack, the Breton thrust his leg between his, and tripped him up in so scientific and successful a manner that the result was positive that the noble art of wrestling was well cultivated in Belle-Isle. The veteran of Rocroy sat down on the floor so roughly that every bone in his body had a separate ache.

“ Excuse me, old man,” said Joel, “ but I saw no other way out of it.” And, leaping over the dumb-founded landlord, he passed through the doorway.

During this time, M. de Lareynie was passing the time away at the Châtelet by reading and hearing reports of the police. He had a grave and honest mien; his broad forehead wore the legal wig very fittingly, and there was as much integrity as energy in his glance.

He was in the heart of his business, when an usher came in and whispered a few words.

“ Ah,” said the magistrate with satisfaction, “ so they have caught him at last. That is right. Bring him in.”

A few minutes later, preceded by the officer and followed by the six archers, Friquet was introduced

into the office. He advanced with his nose in the air and his mouth pursed up in a kind of conceited smile, made a bow according to the rules, and opened his mouth to utter a compliment which he had prepared on the way, to felicitate the magistrate in having the good fortune to set at liberty so shining a star of the future. But the functionary did not allow him any time to do this.

"Hillo, Saint-Jean," he questioned the officer with astonishment, "What in the name of goodness have you brought here?"

"My lord, it is the person you ordered us to apprehend," was the reply.

"Are you mad?" returned the chief of police, shrugging his shoulders. "This, the man in question? you cannot have consulted the description given by all the witnesses whom we examined!" Taking up a paper from the desk, he read, "Here is the paper! Read and compare! Height—over six feet; aspect—herculean; dress—Breton peasant's——"

"But, my lord," protested the officer, "we took the bird in the very room of the very inn where the stranger was said to lodge—I carefully questioned him, and he has asserted that he was the man we were after."

"But you do not accept such statements on plain assertion, do you?"

"Why, my lord, when a prisoner owns he is the right man——"

"Yes, to throw you off the scent! Master Saint-Jean, like your namesake, you have lost your head! you are a blockhead who have allowed yourself to be gulled—you deserve to be——"

The infuriated head of police turned upon Friquet, who was coolly taking a chair, and challenged him roughly with: "Here, what are you doing there?"

"Waiting, at my ease, until your lordship shall have concluded conversing with this officer on a variety of

subjects of which I do not understand. At least, it seems to me that you accuse the poor fellow of committing a blunder—while it is nothing of the kind, I assure your lordship, for I am the person whom the king has no doubt talked to you about."

"Indeed, I am acting on the express order of his majesty—but the description does not apply——"

"A fig for descriptions!" exclaimed the little Parisian impatiently. "I am not six feet high, but after all what is an inch or two? As for the dress of my country, I changed into the present one—just to add to my personal advantages——"

"What, do you claim to be——"

"Claim to be—myself? More than claim, I am proud to declare myself!"

"Is this possible?" muttered Lareynie, fidgeting on his chair. "What a hardened rogue! so you make a boast of what you have done?"

"Of course I do. I am not beginning my career as a military engineer. But wait, my lord, till I make more progress—you will have the eyes dazzled out of your learned head."

The lieutenant of the Royal Police turned to his usher: "Are the register and the constabulary sergeants here?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Let them enter."

As soon as they entered the room, the high official continued: "Clerk, prepare to take down the statements of this man. Sergeants, place yourselves beside him, as he is in your custody now."

Friquet looked with surprise at the new-comers and the speaker:

"How now? what new game are we playing? Statement, clerk, constables—Death of my life! I do not comprehend at all."

"Accused," began the official in a stern voice, "do you acknowledge having maliciously and of afore-

thought contravened the edicts promulgated by our sire, the king——”

It was now the Parisian's turn to fidget.

“Edicts—what edicts? Do I dream? or is it your lordship who has had a sunstroke?”

“The edicts bearing upon duels,” continued Lareynie, “consented to, and signed, through the diligence of the late Cardinal Richelieu, by the lamented King Louis XIII., and renewed by the reigning monarch.”

“I do not know anything about edicts?” muttered the little Parisian, with his hands hanging in his stupor.

“By crossing swords, in the royal domain of St. Germain Forest, with Corporal Bregy of the royal musketeers, who cannot be pursued by justice for aiding in this deed of rebellion from his having unfortunately been killed in the combat.”

Friquet shouted aloud: light burst in upon his brain. It was to lead him before judges that he was furnished with a squad of soldiers and not to escort him into the minister's presence. He was accused of treason and manslaughter, and was to be shut up in prison—all in the stead of his friend Joel of Locmaria.

Without heeding the terror he inspired at last, the magistrate continued:

“In consequence, you become qualified for trial before the tribunal of the Constabulary and Marshals of France, especially instituted to administer the laws of the realm and the will of the king against those guilty of infringing them.” He paused to give his hearer time to realise the true sense of his speech, before he solemnly resumed: “Misdeeds of this kind bearing no less penalty than sentence of death——”

In spite of his bravery, the Parisian sank into the seat, for his legs gave way under him. A mist veiled his eyes, on the background of which he beheld a vision of the executioner, with axe and block. “Unless,”

said Lareynie, "the king grant you mercy—which I very much doubt, seeing the heinous nature of your atrocity."

Friquet ran his hand round his neck where a cold chill seemed to strike like a steel edge.

"You must prepare to sign your avowal—provided that you are the true criminal. For you may have agreed with him to dally with justice that he may profit by the time gained to make his escape over the border——"

This suggestion was a ray of light to the Parisian, who was quickwitted. While he was in jail, Joel might indeed be making his flight homeward. His course was taken in a trice: he would support the imprisonment; suffer judgment to go against him, and even let the execution go on—for he would have saved his friend—of new creation but dear. His face grew calm and his limbs ceased to quiver as he arose, and said steadily:

"My lord, I will trouble you for the pen."

But at this juncture, a violent tumult was audible without; above all a vigorous voice shouted:

"I tell you again that I must see M. de Lareynie—and see him I will, spite of all the devils! were you five hundred strong, you should not keep me out."

There was a clash of weapons and a scuffle before the door was dashed open. The Son of Porthos appeared on the threshold. The six archers courageously formed a line, and crossed halberds to repulse him. To the rescue ran the two constables, while the exempt and the clerk valiantly formed a rear-guard. Joel had not drawn his sword, but, without raising a hand, he cut through the defenders as if he were a cyclone. He planted himself in front of the Chief of Police.

"My lord," he began, "I know what is going on. This devoted friend is sacrificing himself for me. But I do not accept the sacrifice. It was I who violated the edicts for I drew my sword in the precincts of St. Germain, and slew corporal Bregy. The king calls for my

head—I bring it on my shoulders; but let me solicit a boon of your justice and humanity. Let my poor friend go free, who is at the worst guilty solely of heroism and love of me.”

“Monsieur, what you desire shall be done,” replied the Police Lieutenant, moved to the heart by the young man’s air, action and language. “You may depart,” he said to Friquet

The latter leaped into the new-comer’s arms, faltering:

“Joel, Joel, what made you come? why did you not let things have their way? I should have been so happy to contribute to your welfare.”

He was choking with mingled grief and joy, as the Breton folded him to his heart in a brotherly embrace in which he almost disappeared.

The magistrate bent towards the police officer, and said with the conceit of one who rarely was at fault:

“Now we have our man, Saint-Jean! This is the one you should have handled—though it might have cost you your lives.”

The two constables marched up to the youth and one said,

“In the name of the king, I charge you to surrender your sword.”

The other drew from his pocket a short ebony wand with a white knob, and, tapping the youth on the shoulder, said:

“In the king’s name, I arrest you.”

Within an hour, the squire was walked out of the Châtelet between the two sergeants to a coach stationed on the waterside. The soldiers made him step into it and placed themselves on the opposite seat to that he occupied: the rule is for one of two constables to sit beside the prisoner, but in this cage there was no room. A mounted archer of the watch rode up to each door, and at once off went the whole equipage at a gallop.

After a quarter of an hour, it stopped before a for-

tress, defended by an abundance of moats, ramparts and outworks, and with high towers outlined against the sky.

"Alight," said one of the sergeants.

Joel obeyed. Two soldiers who seemed to await him, took each an arm. A man with a bunch of keys in his hand took the lead. The little party passed under a vaulted roof, over a drawbridge, through a guardroom, and a maze of stairs and corridors, into a large yard. Thus they reached the third floor, where one door after another was opened to the number of three. Here the prisoner was thrust into a cell, furnished with bed, table and chair.

"Here you are, at home," said the turnkey.

He retired with the two soldiers, and the keys were heard grating in the locks, and the bolts shooting into their sockets. This sound aroused the captive, who had mechanically paced the long way, accepting all that happened him as in a dream the most monstrous conceptions are met without hesitation and without astonishment. He strode to the door and called:

"I say, you fellows!"

"What is wanting so soon," demanded the turnkey through the barred wicket in the thick door.

"One word, if you please."

"Be quick!"

"I should be obliged to you for telling me in what place I am."

"Beginning your jokes already, eh?" grumbled the man as he departed. "As though you did not know, as well as me, that you are in the Bastille."

CHAPTER XV

A COUNTERCHECK

SINCE a month, Louis XIV. had returned to St. Germain, and the little town reassumed the gala aspect imported by the monarch and his appanage. He was then in the zenith of his power, and the "divinity which hedges a king" sanctified even his foibles. He did not dissimulate any of them. Montespan was the titular favourite and mother of his progeny whom the Widow Scarron cared for, and he had just rewarded the latter by conferring upon her the rank of Marchioness de Suggère. Madame de Sevigné, whose friend she was but who spared nobody with her wit, ran off a series of jests on the title, which she misread as "Suggest."

"A happy *suggestion* of his Majesty," she whispered to the courtiers, "indeed, she had from somebody the *suggestion* to wed the cripple Scarron; it was *suggested* to the mason that he should predict her a great fortune and I should not wonder if envy *suggested* that she should undermine the benefactress who raised her from poverty to confide to her the care of her children by the king."

Apart from the ladies and courtiers discussing this promotion and the bad news of the queen's health, the officers of the life-guards were conversing on matters of discipline. They were the lieutenant of the musketeers, Maupertuis, and the present captain and his predecessor of the guards, Gesvres and Brissac.

"What has become of that limb of the fiend?" inquired the last of the musketeer. "I mean that young bravo from the provinces who slew one of your corporals?"

"Yes, with a splendid thrust through the chest. Well, he is still under lock and bar."

"Are they not going to try him?"

"It is in doubt what to do—for he may not be of noble blood as he pretends. He is plain Joel."

"Impossible! where can a commoner have learnt secrets of fencing sufficient to kill a royal musketeer?"

"Ay, and with a thrust known only in our regiment, but which had almost passed out of memory with the heavy swords for which it was invented. It was called the 'Thrust of Porthos,' from a famous musketeer of the past reign who used it to advantage."

"If I had my way," continued Maupertuis, "I should send him home to plant his cabbages and cut them with his huge sword, for he certainly fought like a brave man. We swordsmen never yet thought a duellist dishonoured for having broken the law. The dishonour would have been in his not accepting the challenge."

"You are not generous to your soldiers," observed Gesvres.

"Oh, to tell you the truth, gentlemen, this Bregy was not prepossessing: a toper who drank when not dicing, and wrangled without cause. Still, his majesty is angry at the edicts of his father being disobeyed, since he renewed them, and I had hard work to pluck from under the royal hand four of my soldiers who were seconds in the duel."

"And did he pardon them?"

"Well, so far as life goes; but they must step out of the household troops' uniform and join the active army."

"Why not send the Breton along with them—he seems even more admirably adapted as food for powder."

"Nay, they will waste him in prison or in the galleys—unless they shoot or hang him."

"How old is he?" asked Brissac, yawning behind his gauntlet.

"On my word, I do not know. I have never seen him. Say between twenty and thirty, I suppose."

The guard officer combed his moustache and thoughtfully remarked, "In that case, he had better be done for at once before we begin to like him."

On the same terrace, in a more remote spot, the Duke of Almada was strolling, leaning on Boislaurier's arm.

"It is very bad," said he, "that all our efforts to trace that young beauty should have been useless."

"Alas, my lord: all our pack of sleuth-hounds have been sent afield, but the best have drawn blank."

"So have those whom I privately employed," continued the ambassador snappishly. "My man Esteban is the most cunning knave that ever was; the rascal calling himself Captain Cordbuff has a nasty cut to seek revenge for; Desgrais, the sharp police-spy who followed the Marchioness de Brinvilliers to Liège and arrested her there—he, like the rest, has been flouted, baffled, and foiled to the top of their skill."

"Has your excellency reflected on this point," went on Boislaurier after a pause: "If I am to believe the reports of my spies, that Madame de la Bassetiere, who is her relative, frets not a bit over her young kinswoman's disappearance. From this I imagine she is not ignorant where she is hidden."

"You may be right."

"And has not my lord sought to get information from her?"

"Yes, but without success. Her old servant-woman is equally as impenetrable. So things go on," he added, with forced gaiety; "in the entire universe, only one incorruptible chamberwoman existed, and luck falls so that she is across our path."

A fresh silence ensued, which the subordinate broke.

"Possibly Mdlle. du Tremblay has returned home?"

"To Anjou? I have written thither, and the answer came this morning that she has not been seen."

"Then, we must throw down the cards—the winning one is not among them."

"Why?" returned the duke quickly. "It is missing,

but we can substitute another or find one to our hand. At the same time, I do not conceal that this loss puts me in terrible turmoil. Confound that young springald!"

"What springald, my lord?" inquired Boislaurier.

"Oh, that bucolic Amadis who happened upon the scene just in the nick to cut the prey out of the grip of our myrmidons. We must settle accounts one of these days with him." Pressing his companion's arm, he continued with a dreamy eye, "Let me tell you, good Boislaurier, that some indescribable, mysterious sympathy attracts me towards that young man; when first my sight lit upon him, I felt that cold tremor which the superstitious say denotes that one is walking on a grave. He pleased me highly at the Saumur inn. His appearance and his manner remind me of a dear old friend whose loss wrung from me many tears, I should have liked to help him on, but the upstart deliberately places himself in the way and upsets my plans. So much the worse for him! Never has man thwarted me and not repented it. I level obstacles: I overthrow adversaries and I kill enemies."

"But has not this youth likewise disappeared?"

"Yes; a proof that the pair have gone off together. But I will find them, and——"

A threatening gesture completed the interrupted phrase.

"But what is going on yonder?" he said, in a change of tone. "Why that flocking to one spot? has the king come forth?"

There was a great stir on the terrace and in the grounds.

"My lord, it is the Marchioness de Montespan."

"Ah, very well—I understand. Alone in her room sits Queen Maria Theresa; but the gilded throng crowds around the favourite. Is his majesty with the latter?"

"No, your grace, there are but two ladies by her side—one the Widow Scarron, and—and——"

"One of her sisters, of course?"

"Nay—it cannot be—I am labouring under some delusion!"

"What is the matter?" queried Almada.

The gentleman did not reply immediately; he riveted his eyes on the marchioness's companion, and finally faltered:

"Still, that step, those features—why, 'tis the same—my lord, it is the girl whom we believed buried in the bowels of the earth—She who escaped all our researches—Mdlle. du Tremblay."

"Mdlle. du Tremblay!" was the outcry of the Spanish duke.

"None other—you have but to look. There, by the edge of the fountain basin."

Almada shielded his eyes with his hand and after a long scrutiny replied:

"You made no mistake. It is she. On my word, it is a true saying that 'Truth is stranger than fiction.' Rubbing his hands to overcome their stiffness, he chuckled: "Who spoke of throwing down the cards? We shall win with ours, because it is in the hands of the opponent. Boislaurier, this time the game is ours."

In fact, they saw Mdlle. du Tremblay.

She walked on one side of the Marchioness de Montepan, who had the Widow Scarron on her left. The favourite wore a silken robe of sky blue; the governess a dead-leaf coloured dress, rather poor in effect; while the new-comer, thanks to the plotter's *suggestion*, and to shine the brighter for her dull array, was clad in a changeable silk. It was trimmed with Venetian point lace and knots of pale green, amid the pearly and rosy tints of the silk. This was not the court type, to which the device of the toilet contributed a main part but the loveliness which prolongs the pleasure of the gaze and discloses innumerable fascinations at every turn. Among these charms must be named the melancholy and the indifference which were read on the young face

as on an open page. Aurore considered the brilliant courtiers with neither astonishment nor embarrassment, neither curiosity nor interest. Mortal repining was visible behind the immobile and languid mask. Everybody wondered who was the new-comer who soared above the glitter which environed her—the glory of the foremost court in Christendom.

As the three ladies stopped before still another social gathering, a new movement was made in the elegant assemblage. All mouths opened at once and the whisper ran from the forest gates to the terrace balustrade:

“Ladies and gentlemen, the King!”

Louis descended the palace stairs. This day he wore the countenance he put on when, as St. Simon the memoir-writer says, “he meant to transact business.” He was clad, too, in black velvet, with worked gold buttons; the Blue Ribbon crossed his scarlet satin vest, embroidered with flowers. A white plume curled around his beaver. The only jewels were in his shoes and garters. He leaned, for effect rather than for support, on a cane with a jewelled handle.

As the courtiers gathered round him, he looked more careworn, and made a sign that he wished to be alone with the Marchioness de Montespan. On seeing the king draw near, both her companions had started to withdraw, but she had beckoned them back, and said with that familiarity which she showed to the greatest personage of the kingdom, and which her lover allowed her to use towards him, though he was most particular about etiquette.

“Sire, here is the Marchioness de Suggère, who wishes nothing so much as to thank your majesty for the new favour of which she is the object.”

Widow Scarron made a low curtsy, and said:

“Will your majesty permit the most devoted of your servants to present the expression of boundless gratitude for the boons with which she had been ceaselessly

overwhelmed by the most generous and magnificent of sovereigns."

Her voice trembled, though, in uttering this studied speech, of which the vain Louis delightfully swallowed the laudative epithets, nothing was more agreeable to a ruler whom seventy years' reign had but partly dulled as the joy of being praised and adored.

"Marchioness," responded he, "I felt bound to reward the care which you have taken of my children, for whom I am cognisant of the fact that you have been truly a mother."

This was an undisguised thrust at La Montespan, but she merely smiled as she toiled with her fan. The monarch turned to her without having paid the slightest attention to Mdle. du Tremblay, and said abruptly to the favourite:

"Now as regards ourselves, madame."

With the greatest tranquillity the marchioness walked on beside him, in silence, for she was waiting for the onset, though she preserved her calmness. On the contrary, the king was agitated.

"Madame," he said, at last finding courage, "to my regret I have to inform you of a decision I have come to, which will certainly affect you as much as it does myself. It is necessary that we should be most careful in our relations; the queen is so ill that I am bound to spare her everything of the nature to distress and impede her recovery.

"Ah, indeed!" sighed the marchioness with the utmost indifference. The king was evidently ill at ease, for he did not look at the lady and pretended to flip a white pebble on the path with his cane. She kept her eyes on him, though with the tranquillity which was exasperating to him.

"I see," said she, trifling with her fan, "that your majesty has been listening to the queen's physicians, who must of course say something to earn their salaries."

"No, madame, I have been guided solely by my own instinct which alone I obey."

As though she had not heard him, the favourite went on:

"As you have decided, it only remains for me to bow to your wisdom. The preachers Bossuet and Bourdaloue are possessed with eloquence to make converts through a wall of stone—I have been converted, and religion and duty justify me in breaking the bonds which are a weight upon my conscience and an outrage on morality."

"What!" exclaimed the monarch, wincing, "Do you propose——"

"That we should part? Yes, sire. I take the initiative. I am only too happy to spare you the mortification of telling me to depart."

But she did not cease to smile, and the king could not understand her. It was not without violent apprehension that he had made up his mind to announce the rupture to his left-hand queen. He expected the outbursts of unspeakable temper for which the marchioness was famous. More than once he had felt the lash. But the irritable Athenais spoke without anger and sharpness. This resignation offended him, for was it not an insult to his inner self?

"It is settled then," said the Marchioness, "I quit the court to-morrow. The sooner the better, I think, for good intentions should be carried out immediately."

"Do you then quit my court without regret?"

"Yes, I do."

Louis bit his lip, unwilling to admit that *he* could be dispensed with.

"I have no reason to be uneasy about my children, as I so recently heard your majesty say they would be cared for by their second mother. Besides, I may be allowed to see them in my retreat at Clagny, where I intend awaiting the further pleasure of the king."

"In that out-of-the-way place?"

"A desert is the fit refuge for one who must look to her salvation: so I supplicate your Majesty not to stand in the way of my holy occupation. Like Mary Magdalen the great sinner, I want to repent of my errors, which are also in some degree your own, so that my prayers must include my Louis, and of the scandal which we both have set before a world too good for me. I shall ask heaven to make those forgive me whom I shall strive to forgive while praying, trying to be contrite and performing deeds of charity."

"Would you try to forget every one?"

"Without exception."

Louis took the head off a beautiful pond lily with a cut of his cane. So he could be forgotten—ignored? His unmeasured pride was stung to the quick: but hiding his wound under a stiff and offended air, he said:

"Enough! go when you like."

"As soon as I shall have finished a duty—placed under the sceptre of your majesty's justice a person whom the queen's friends themselves would deem worthy of your interest."

She motioned to Aurore, who had stood at a distance, and added:

"Come here, mademoiselle."

She obeyed blushing with emotion.

"Sire, this young lady, daughter of one of your old and faithful servants, who has been pursued by villains—perhaps seeking to repay upon the daughter of the former Governor of your royal prison of the Bastille, the grudge which they owed him and your majesty. She begs to be placed under the safeguard of your justice and authority."

Louis looked at Aurore who curtsied to him, and he was impressed deeply by her angelic appearance and pure looks. La Montespan did not fail to notice the effect and a gleam of satisfaction sparkled in her eyes.

"Sire, the lady has been the victim of an audacious attempt to abduct her in the streets of Paris, almost

in daylight, and only by a miracle did she escape. Speak, my young friend, lest his majesty believe the event impossible."

The girl related the incident in few words.

"By my soul," exclaimed the hearer. "Such a misdeed must not go unpunished. The author shall be found out, for which I will give orders to my police lieutenant."

"I doubt not," said the marchioness, "that the perpetrator is some considerable personage who is above the laws."

"Madame," retorted Louis, frowning gravely, "know that I allow nobody in my kingdom to set the laws at defiance."

"Yet," persisted the marchioness, "I should beg measures to be taken for our safety, for I reckon on being accompanied to the Clagny Convent by this poor hunted girl."

The king held out his hand over Aurore's head with a dignified gesture, and answered:

"Rest assured. The young lady is now beneath my protection. I shall take heed that everybody knows this, and woe to whomsoever is guilty towards her of any enterprise of the kind stated."

"Oh, sire, how kind you are," faltered the girl.

"You need not thank me," returned the ruler. "It is a prince's duty to watch over the safety of his subjects. A sweet duty to fulfil," he gallantly subjoined, without taking his gaze off Aurore, "when the object is the daughter of one of his gentlemen and is herself one of the most accomplished persons whom I have ever had the blessing to admire in my court."

"Your majesty is kind," stammered the girl, no less confused by the look than by the compliment.

"Ah!" muttered the marchioness; "The fish nibbles—he will take his bait."

"If you must go," said the king to the elder lady slowly and watching her now, "at least I may come at

times to disturb your solitude? Besides, you must return when I shall have silenced ridiculous gossips and importunate counsellors—" Athenaïs shook her head hopelessly, but he continued: "If only to show your charming protégé that your pleading is not forgotten."

"If your majesty commands, and Mdle. du Tremblay requires a court presentation, we shall hasten. Otherwise—" She heaved a deep sigh and hid her face behind her fan. He may have thought to hide a tear—if so, it was one of glee and triumph.

The king turned away as well from the two ladies as from all the others and the courtiers, and leaning against a pedestal, he became lost in musing when—as if the marble were suddenly imbued with speech, he heard these words whispered in an odd voice:

"Is she not divinely fair?"

The king abruptly turned round and from his lips burst the name of the Duke of Almada. It was, indeed, Aramis who had quietly glided up and saluted the king of France. The latter was annoyed at this interruption; he liked the man little. He had never forgotten the tragic episode in his youth, which we have related in the works entitled "*Louise de la Vallière*," and "*The Man in the Iron Mask*," but which might have borne the name of "*The Conspiracy of Aramis*." Its object, it will be remembered, was to seat on the throne the elder and twin brother of Louis, who was incarcerated in the Bastille and terminated his wretched life in another prison, where he was seen by Athos and his son Bragelonne, while the prince was wearing the Iron Mask and was guarded by Captain d'Artagnan. The king remembered with horror that Aramis had dared to lay violent hands on him, when he, assisted by the gigantic Porthos, abducted him by night from the Château of Vaux, and confined him in a dungeon, where he almost perished of terror, rage and despair. This old man beside him had once dethroned him to place in his stead his other self, and such deeds are

never forgiven by kings. Hence Louis XIV. would never forgive the Chevalier d'Herblay, the Bishop of Vannes, the comrade of Porthos, the friend of Fouquet, and the Aramis who had extorted his terms from Anne of Austria, his mother. But Aramis knew what he was talking about when he assured Athos, during his flight from the royal justice, that he had but to reach Spain to reconcile himself with the king whom he showed his contempt for. Indeed, as General of the Jesuits, he had mounted to the Embassy of Spain for the French Court. The necessity of reasons of state policy constrained Louis to welcome the Duke of Almada, the confidant of his brother-in-law Charles II. Still it was almost without precedent that anybody should put a question to a king, and Louis assumed a stiff and chilling attitude of haughtiness.

"My lord," he said in a tone of agreement with attitude and look, "methinks that you question me?"

"Heaven forbid that I should so far forget my respect," responded the old duke, bowing. "I only ventured to echo your majesty's thoughts. Pray overlook my error or my wrongfulness in act."

"Of whom are you speaking?" demanded the king, a little affected by this keenness of sight.

"Of the lady who has just had the honour of conversing with your majesty."

"Oh, true—Madame de Montespan was announcing her retirement to a convent, and——"

"A mournful journey?" exclaimed Aramis, and then to himself he quickly said: "Into a nunnery. Ah, now she will be dwelling in my states—and I shall know all her thoughts." Aloud, he observed significantly, "It is of the other, the younger lady that I spoke. The marchioness is indisputably fair, but only the fairest of earthly creatures, while her companion is like an angel come down from the skies. *Mdlle. du Tremblay*——"

"Then you know her?"

"Such is my good fortune, and I take the liberty to add that never has a loftier and braver spirit inhabited more perfect freedom."

In the silence which ensued, the sovereign's hostility was fought against by a powerful curiosity.

"You began to say that Mdlle. du Tremblay——"

"She comes of good family in Anjou which has proven its value to the realm, and she deserves by her name, character and virtues whatever favours the king may shower upon her."

"For the moment, my lord, she asks for nothing: merely to be shielded——"

"Shielded? as though such an angel could have enemies."

"An attempt has been made to carry her off."

"Is it possible?"

"Some scoundrel who remains unknown, but I shall have him sought for and dealt with by my officers of justice."

The Duke of Almada did not flinch.

"You may be certain," he exclaimed with warmth, "that no one forms more ardent vows than I do for the punishment of the guilty. Ah, if I were half as young again, at the happiest period of life, when one is no longer a boy and not yet in the dry leaf—ah! to love, to reward and punish—with one's own hand."

His auditor sighed, for the second time.

"That is your majesty's time of prime," said he, "though of age and death one should not speak to princes, and yet these sighs testify to an alarming state of mind for any one of the opinion that jollity is the half of health."

"Duke, you are not looking on a happy man."

"When the saying is 'Happy as a king!' when from that point my august master is ready to make any sacrifices to preserve the good graces of your majesty—it must not be as a monarch that you have become the fount of sighs—but, perchance, as a man——"

"The proverb you quote is mendacious like the rest. Even one of my citizens is happier than I. He does as he pleases."

"Well, why should not your majesty act in like manner? when they are tired of the cold joint at home, they sally forth to dine at the eating-house. It is true that your majesty may object that he has already tried dining out, and——"

"Duke," sharply, but the smile would come.

"If the frivolity of the simile offends your majesty, I will tell you plainly that I am afraid that your majesty has a frightful attack of the blue devils. Take heed, my king!" said Aramis, cunningly seeming to return to his old allegiance at this point of serving the sovereign, "The blue devils are the ones who tease one to death if not repelled in time, and the only recourse is to the prescription of Don Juan, who cured the heartache of one lady by turning to have the heartache through another."

The hearer wore a guarded manner.

"Well, duke! this counsel does not smack of the churchman, which once you were."

"Ah, sire, the reason is that before I wore the mitre, I shaded my brow with the red-plumed hat of your lamented father's musketeer. And then, if your majesty allows me to babble, it is the habit of men of my age—nevertheless, there is good sense in the talk of some old men—I am astonished at the backwardness about imitating the citizen, who—disgusted by a servant-maid, or grown beyond tenderness, or what you will, goes and gets another, more soft and accommodating. Albeit the king punishes me for this frankness in excess by revoking his usual kindness so far incessantly shown me, I will believe that the Marchioness de Montespan is the cause of the cares darkening your sovereign brow—it is she who by her impudence—the word is strong but true—has paraded a connection which her very interest and her gratitude

impressed her to conceal as much as possible. She, I say, has led the queen—who has hitherto suffered in silence of an incurable ailment: loving one whom a whole realm adores but who loves her not——”

“Duke!”

“It is the publication of such scandal which has brought upon your anointed head the thunders of the preachers——”

“What, do you know——” began the king, fingering his cane-head nervously.

“An ambassador is bound by his office to know everything in the court which he forms part of. I knew also that your majesty is on the eve of parting with the lady, and that it is done without regret on her side—for heaven has endowed your majesty with too fine a discernment for it not to perceive that she loved you less for your sake than her own——”

“Not thus,” sighed Louis, with melancholy, “not thus was I beloved by that poor La Vallière, and Fontanges.”

“I know not how Mdlle. de la Vallière died,” said the Spanish envoy, “as I was not in the pleasant land of France, but as for the guileless Fontanges, whom poison slew, because she had a love for you without bounds or calculation——”

“Duke, this supposition,” began the king, looking at the speaker with a kind of affright:

“Sire, the legal axiom, ‘who profits by this crime?’ is fully applicable here. But I am not going to have the irreverence to insist, since in his high wisdom, the sovereign wishes night to veil an atrocity so abominable. I confine myself to weeping over the inoffensive, unavenged victim.”

“Ah!” sighed the monarch, shaking his head, “where shall I find another such as she?”

“Do not slander the sex, sire,” quickly interrupted the old duke, “thank heaven, all do not resemble the ambitious heiress of the Mortemarts. All do not reign

by the ascendancy of a remorseless spirit and by the terror inspired by their transports and violence. To some exceptions, love is an entire, absolute and incessant sacrifice—a complete abnegation of self to the gain of the beloved object. These find all their joy and pride in seeing the first of the kings of earth lay by their side, in shade and silence, the burden of his grandeur and cares. In the consciousness of power they adore not the glory of the crown or the harvest of honours and favours which crop up beneath the monarch's feet, but the handsome gentleman who kneels in passion and ardour to intoxicate them with caresses. They are delighted that the sovereign puts off, on the threshold of the hidden retreat, that supreme majesty which dazzled the people. They prefer him as he is—asking but his affection and conspiring solely to make him happy. Only too happy to be selected by him from the garden of flowers, they have for him the most shining face, the blindest smile, and pure heart—resembling those vestals of the Hindoo temples who, in the mysterious gloom, administer to the idol whom they are ever fated to worship.”

The king's air spoke, as plainly as words: “Continue!” But the wily Aramis answered the mute invitation in this sentence: “Oh, sire, I have finished my sermon, which I greatly fear has occupied too much time. Your majesty's ministers will accuse me of diverting it to the detriment of the state affairs.”

“There is a time for everything, and I have still a question to put to you.”

“I am ever at the orders of the king.”

“Has this fair young lady no kinsfolk?”

“Alas! she is an orphan, your majesty, and it is on this deplorable condition that I wish to call your benevolent attention.”

“I am all attention!”

“This ward of the Marchioness de Montespan—in some degree mine, though she has not charged me to

intervene in her favour—has repaired to Paris from her province to prosecute a hazardous lawsuit, on the winning of which depends her fortune, a pretty one, together with the subsistence of her young brother and sister—two children so young that she stands towards them as a mother. Our Aurore is poor but proud beyond equal, and sues for nothing. Hence it is I who plead for her, thinking if some post could be given her, however humble, near your august person, its income would eke out her meagre resources."

"You have spoken well," said the monarch gravely, as his countenance visibly cleared. "At the present moment, a post of reader is vacant in the queen's household, which I accord to Mdlle. du Tremblay."

"Sire," returned the duke, bowing, "one cannot stay by your majesty any length of time without every instant augmenting one's gratitude."

"Your ward may at once enter upon her duties. I will speak to the queen presently on the subject, from whom you shall hear her announce the good news to your interesting orphan, should you come this evening as I trust."

"I will not fail," replied the old noble, bowing again.

"In that case, keep well until we meet this evening again, my dear duke!"

At these parting words, an ironical gleam passed over the arch-plotter's countenance. In the midst of the doffing of hats from the courtiers who had watched this incident from a distance, and the smiles of the ladies, Aramis joined Boislaurier whose arm he took once more.

"Well, my lord, have we the cue?" asked the latter.

The old peer laughed: "In faith, I am not complaining," said he. "The game is as good as won."

CHAPTER XVI

STILL WATERS RUN DEEP

IN the beautiful apartment situated in the south wing of the palace the queen's card party was held. This hall, brilliantly illuminated, was literally crammed with the courtiers and ladies. In the midst, before a large fire, Queen Maria Theresa was sitting at a card-table, between her ladies, and engaged at her favourite pastime. The queen was short and stout, and when she walked or danced, her knees gave way, which still further diminished her in stature: her teeth were spoilt by the excessive eating of chocolate. She worshipped her husband, and kept him in view when he was in the same room, and she would be happy all the day if once he smiled on her. If he were more kind than that, she would run around to tell how glad she was, to anybody who would listen to her.

The topic of the conversation was this very retirement of the favourite—in low whispers some said “disgrace” and “exile,” not pretty words, while all eyes were turned upon the proud marchioness. With out flinching she bore the gaze: gay and yet haughtily, she prattled in a group of her faithful friends, but the Widow Scarron had returned to Paris to watch over her royal nurselings. Aurore du Tremblay was isolated in a window recess and looked on without seeing, and heard the conversation without heeding.

“The king!” called out an attendant.

The king entered with his minister Louvois. Those assembled made a movement to concentrate where the new arrival should come to a halt: all heads bowed to the sovereign. Louis wore no fierce aspect on this occasion; his demeanour was rather contented and kindly.

“Do not let me interfere with the arrangements,”

he said to the queen who made a pretence of rising. "Let no one be disturbed. What were you saying, my lord?" he continued, addressing the Minister of War.

"Sire, I have the honour to inform your majesty that the Duke of Lorraine has marched his forces into Freiburg, where he threatens our Alsatian strongholds, insufficiently garrisoned, I am sorry to admit, as our troops have not had time to cross the Rhine on their return out of Flanders——"

The king did not heed, for his attention was travelling with his gaze elsewhere; finally discovering Mdlle. du Tremblay, he hastened to make a sign.

"Very well," said he, interrupting the minister, "to-morrow in the council, we will endeavour to remedy this evil."

Meanwhile the queen had not taken up the cards, and like the rest of the assemblage, who held their breath, she waited—some important event was about to take place.

During this silence, La Montespan detached herself from the group formed by her friends. She crossed the hall with a firm step suiting her figure; her gaze scanned the spectators with the proud serenity of one who despised enemies, of which for three parts the gathering was composed. On arriving by the card-table, and bending to Maria Theresa with a humility too deep not to be ironical, she spoke with measured slowness and contemptuous tranquillity:

"Will your majesty allow me to inform you of my resolution to leave the court and retire into my domain of Clagny?"

"My dear Marchioness," replied the daughter of King Philip II., with fairly concealed joy on her face and in her tone, "I have no right to prevent you doing what you wish. It is the king who may retain or grant you leave. No doubt his majesty, whom you should have consulted before coming to me, will have com-

municated his will: whatever it decided upon was well decided."

The marchioness again curtsied with the same emotionless calmness; she never lost her smile, but took a step to regain her place, when the queen asked her to stay an instant. The favourite stopped with an inward shudder; she instinctively felt that something unpleasant was about to occur.

"Mention has been made to me," proceeded Maria Theresa, "of a noble orphan young lady whom you have warmly recommended to his majesty's bounty. I wish to do something for her. Is this Mdlle. du Tremblay here?"

"She is," responded Louis with eagerness, and he pointed out Aurore, who immediately became the object of all eyes.

"Come nearer, lady," said the queen, and the girl approached nervously.

The marchioness had lost her colour. She seemed to recoil upon herself with a view of leaping in between Aurore and the sovereign.

"Madame," faltered she in a voice wherein anger and astonishment struggled, "Mdlle. du Tremblay needs no help, I thank heaven——"

"From this moment, fear not," returned Maria Theresa coldly. "You are right, for henceforward she belongs to my household. She takes the place left vacant by Mdme. d'Aigueperse, and will be installed by the mistress of the house into that office to-morrow."

The favourite did not retort, for there is no contesting with the queen. But her eyelids burned red amid the pallor of her visage, and through them one barely perceived the baleful glance of the bruised viper.

Meanwhile, Aurore, however much surprised at this unexpected boon, and tottering under the general scrutiny, bent the knee to Maria Theresa, and murmured:

"Oh, what have I done to deserve such honour?"

"Rise, child," said the other, holding out her hand to assist her up, "and recover yourself. I have been told that your father left no property, though he had long and faithfully served the realm. What I am granting, with the assent and from the initiative of the king, is no favour, as you seem to think—but a beginning of reparation: that is all. Duchess," she went on, to Madame de Montausier, her chief lady in attendance, "place Mdlle. du Tremblay near yourself. It is understood that she is not to quit you until we shall have lodged her in the apartments which you will have made ready for her."

The Marchioness de Montespan walked towards Louis, with her pupils darting out the bluish flame which may be seen in the wild beast's. Her voice hissed between her nearly closed teeth, to utter these words:

"Well done, sire—my compliments to you. But this is not the last card and I have yet to play!"

On the royal face was a surprise too great not to be assumed for a purpose.

"Really, I do not understand you," he said; "did you not beg me to look after the welfare of this poor girl? Am I not giving you satisfaction when I place her for safety under the protection of the queen?"

And the cardplaying went on. Maria Theresa smiled, though she was losing, for she did not know how to cheat as the ladies of quality did in her day. In all the above, her august master had approved of her by a sly glance. All agreed that the slighted queen had this time shown good sense, dignity and grace. All likewise hailed the new-comer's beauty, modesty, and ease. The general sentiment was friendly towards her.

Mdme. de Montespan was shunned, but she was not an antagonist whom one reverse defeated thoroughly. She shifted her rage and hid her spite under the armour of her pride.

Meanwhile, the king had reached the place where

Aurore stood—too unknown for anybody to congratulate her on any pretext.

“Well,” he inquired, after saluting her respectfully, “are you satisfied, lady?”

She uttered some words of thanks which he interrupted.

“It is not me you should thank, but your friend whose earnest entreaty furnished me with the means of repairing forgetfulness which was growing into a fault.”

At the same time, he stood aside and disclosed the ex-Bishop of Vannes.

“The Chevalier d’Herblay!” exclaimed Mdlle. du Tremblay.

“The Spanish Ambassador, the Duke of Almada,” the old noble smilingly corrected her. “At the ‘Golden Heron,’ did I not promise you should see me again?”

Aurore looked at him with astonishment, murmuring:

“Is it to you, then, that I owe this honour?”

He interrupted her by taking her hand with the prelate’s unction and kissing it with the musketeer’s gallantry.

“I am your obedient servant—your friend, if you deem me worthy of the title—and your physician, as you may remember my experience on the Saumur highway.”

“Just as though I could forget it!”

“Well, it is from that point of view that I forbid any transports of gratitude at present. You may make up for it by-and-by when I shall have done for you all that I intend.” He emphasised this pledge with an odd accent. Lowering his voice still more, he concluded: “Meantime, allow me to ask the favour of a few minutes’ hearing—not here, or this evening—a private audience—it cannot be dangerous with one of my age!”

Mdlle. du Tremblay reflected briefly before she resolutely answered:

"My lord duke, I am the more happy to confer with you from my having an entreaty to address to you."

"Is that so?"

"The generous support which you have lent me without my knowledge, and offer to continue, embolden me to entrust to you the secret which torments me and the grief in which I am overwhelmed."

It was now the duke's turn to look at her, stupefied. She dropped her head in despair.

"Alas!" she sighed, "amid these unexpected boons which Providence sends me, my soul is sad."

"Is this possible?"

"You can relieve me of doubt and ignorance which is killing me."

"Command me as you like, my dear child." Laying a finger on his lips, he pursued: "But, hush! this is not the place or the time to exchange confidence, where they are watching and listening. I hear," he added, "that you are to stay with the head-mistress of the queen's ladies until you have your own apartments. The queen does not rise till late, and I will call on you to-morrow."

As he rose after bowing, a hand touched his shoulder. It was the king's who was returning after going around the room, and distributing those compliments which are known as "court holy-water."

"My lord duke," said he, "I shall have something to say to you on my leaving the State Council to-morrow."

Mdlle. du Tremblay was installed in Montausier House, which had a quiet exterior but the apartments were large, handsome and nicely ordered. One of the first floor parlours was given to her to receive the Spanish Ambassador. She sat on the sofa, and her elbow rested on soft cushions as her hand sustained her

drooping head. Her eyes were burning. And yet it did not seem that she had cause for this feeling. In one day, without effort, she had won the aim of her life—the object of every lady in France—royal favour!

A country girl, with no money or credit, fighting with bad fortune for her existence and that of others dear to her, she was this day installed at court. Her post was beside the queen; the king had given her a welcome; the men bowed to her and the ladies began to be jealous. The whole appeared like a dream.

But the suffering which affected her heart was real enough.

For a month she had no news of Joel. Widow Scarron did not tell her the truth. Made restless by the strange disappearance, the latter sent Honorin to the "Blackamoor" Tavern, where the servant questioned the landlord, who related how his lodger was arrested, and he had not hidden the cause. The royal governess knew too well with what a dreadful penalty the tribunal of honour punished those who infringed the edicts. Louis XIV. had always shown himself severe towards duellists. She recoiled from the idea of driving to despair—perhaps to death, the girl whom she had brought back to life, by telling her the fate which was in store for the Breton.

Later on Mdlle. du Tremblay was presented to the Marchioness de Montespan. The latter was admitting to herself that her charms were becoming too mature longer to hold her royal lover. She planned to have a voice in the choice of her successor, whom she hoped to make her own willing instrument, so that she would still rule. Aurore, without relatives, fortune or will of her own, seemed to her just the obedient doll she looked for to play the part. Hence she had hastened to offer her services.

Aurore did not suspect the design. She had accepted with gratitude the favourite's assistance. But the sentiments inspired by the latter did not include confidence:

hence she had preserved her heart's secret. She wept for the lost squire, but in concealment.

Her reverie was interrupted by the footman, coming to announce the Duke of Almada. The latter entered briskly and with a winning mien to take a seat near the young lady, who had risen to receive him. He motioned her to resume her place.

"Come, come, my child," said he paternally: "why this sorrow on your sweet face? why are your cheeks so pale and your eyes so red? Yesterday you were blessed with an honour which most women would covet."

"My lord duke, I am in distress because a witness is lacking to my happiness—" she hesitated.

"Why this emotion?" said the nobleman with an encouraging smile. "I have been in holy orders and was wont to hear confessions much more painful than what you may have to tell. Is there any need to tremble at undergoing the universal fate of being in love?"

Mdlle. du Tremblay hid her face in her hands, and muttered:

"Have you, indeed, guessed?"

"There is no need to be a great wizard. I had only to look upon your countenance and see there the reflections from your candid mind. Besides, could anything else happen in a court full of dazzling cavaliers, with burning eye and winsome speech?"

Aurore shook her head.

"The man I love is not a noble of the court."

"Oh, then, it is some friend of your childhood, or companion of your youth, some kinsman, perhaps, whom you left in your province of Anjou?"

Aurore repeated her answer, while the ambassador's sharp glance was studying her under the pretence of good humour.

"Well," he proceeded, "it cannot be any low-born fellow. A girl of your birth and character does not look

below her to make one of those selections which raise a blush."

"My lord," quickly protested Aurore, "M. Joel is a nobleman."

"Joel," reiterated the duke, seeming to reflect; "methinks I have heard the name before. Oh," he exclaimed, "to be sure! I recall it. The young gentleman of the Nantes coach! Now I am quite at my ease, after your giving me such a fright. This is not a serious matter."

"I love him," observed Aurore firmly.

"Nonsense! a girlish fancy! A wayside romance, sketched out, but stopping at the first chapter. I am not ignorant that he defended you against some footpad or other and heaven forbid that I should gainsay your feeling some gratitude towards him; but lasting gratitude would degenerate into folly."

"I love him," said the girl again, with the same determined tone.

The churchman also assumed a severe mien.

"Then," he said coldly, "you will have to muster courage to tear this foolish passion from your heart. Everything at the same time commands you to do so—circumstances, your interest and future, and the prospects of others—even to the providential part which you are called upon to play."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed the girl, revealing all her astonishment.

"I say that the good fortune befalling you yesterday is nothing to that which still awaits you. In short, all that you may have conceived most fairylike and magical in your girlish dreams—you will be transported to the threshold of paradise or——"

"Gracious Heaven!" faltered she, "I cannot understand——"

"Listen to me, my child, that all may be clear unto you."

He leant towards her, and speaking with studied

slowness and in a low voice, so that she could the better hear and comprehend the sense and range of his words, without being overheard, he said:

"Isolated as you have been in the country, some rumours must have reached you, so that you cannot be unaware what part was played in the court circle where you are entering, by Louise de la Vallière—the first love of our fickle sovereign. You likewise cannot be ignorant of the position held here at present by the Marchioness de Montespan, whose patronage you accept. You must have formed your opinion of our prince."

"It is quite true that the story has been told me of the former, and how cruelly she expiates not having resisted her heart: as for the second, I accepted her services—not without repugnance and self-resistance, as heaven is my witness! because I had urgent need of a shield of power against a stranger who persecutes me. To appreciate their conduct is a care that I leave to their conscience, which will awaken sooner or later; to the world of fashion, their accomplice; and to history which will judge them. As a Christian, I pity them."

"However, you must admit that their fate is worthy of envy. To reign over a king; dispose with both hands of his boon and favours; to assure the peace of Europe, or at pleasure, unchain the dogs of war upon the nations: inspire grand ideas; lead to the fulfilment of great deeds——"

"This, my lord, is the function of the queen."

"If the queen were able to accomplish it; in the first place, she must have her husband's love—but our king never felt more than esteem for his; policy united them and temperament separates them."

"Then I feel no less compassion for the lady neglected than for her successful rivals. Still, were the choice given me, I should prefer her loneliness to their victory—but I own that I do not see——"

"To what I am coming? to this—the king has had

a fresh feeling spring up in his heart within a few hours——”

“He no longer loves Mdme. de Montespan?”

“He is madly in love with another!”

“Another?”

“A beautiful creature, who need never dread the fate of the proud daughter of the Mortemarts, if she will listen to the advice of a true friend, in exchange for a devotion above proof: she will then realise the problem of fixing an erratic star—of making a capricious lover one of the most faithful——”

The tempter paused to study the hearer's countenance. She seemed to be turning something over in her mind.

“My lord, pray be indulgent,” she muttered; “I am but a poor country girl, and really I wonder if——”

“What!” ejaculated the plotter, enjoying in advance the surprise he had ready to finish with, “have you not understood that it is you whom we are talking about?”

He certainly expected surprise, real or simulated, and was much mistaken, for the girl remained silent. It was evident that her intelligence refused to admit the fact.

“Yes,” said the ambassador, dwelling on his words, “it is you whom his majesty loves; I am offering you a coronet, if not a crown for one word which, falling from your lips, will allow him to hope that you will receive the proofs of this love and its disclosure without anger.”

Mdlle. du Tremblay sprang up suddenly.

“Heaven help me!” she cried, “the king loves me? loves *me*?”

In her eyes and her voice was immense apprehension, and she threw up her arms in front of her as though to repulse the words which she had heard.

Almada also rose and laid his hand on her shoulder familiarly.

"Be calm, child," he said. "You have a superior mind as I have a practical one. Do not let us waste time which we may turn to a better purpose. Let me tell you the Company of Jesus, of which I am the General, means to preside in the Royal Council and direct its policy. Help us thoroughly and we will sustain you to the utmost limits. Would you like to govern France with us? I leave you the solid part of the realm and the better task—to do good where others have failed. If you were an ordinary woman, I should picture to you the court prostrated at your feet, the dazzling of festivals, the concert of homage, and the incense rising for you to share with the demi-god whom Europe considers as arbiter of its destinies. But you are as good as you are fair, and I simply say unto you—So far the people have cursed the favourites who preceded you; let them learn to bless you."

The duke stopped again, not of his own accord, but from the effect of his words. A burning glare blazed in Aurore's eyes. A flush mounted to her cheeks, while she opened her mouth to speak. But the words, though upon her lips, were not uttered. Her eyelids fell like veils over the lightning glance, and she became calm again. She gently released herself from the old noble's grip, and proceeded towards the door.

"Where are you going?" inquired the other.

"To quit this house," was her curt answer in a broken voice; "I will leave the town, and return to my native village in Anjou, where the peasants have not yet learnt to cease to respect the daughter of their old master."

"Going away? surely you are not in your senses! And after what you have heard?"

"It is precisely what I heard that commands me to remain no longer in a place where I have been insulted. Oh, I do not care to hurt your feelings—I am not one

who repays insult in the same coin. Besides, I am firmly persuaded that you did not believe you were insulting me. That is credible enough; for the world in which you dwell and in which I entered yesterday, regards as a glory what I call a shame. I was alone and without money, and you offered me the means to become rich and mighty. This is great kindness on your part, and I must beg your pardon for not being on the level of the task which you deemed me worthy to accomplish. How could things be otherwise when I am a Puritan, with odd ideas about honour. I would rather die by the side of the ditch, than be satiated with royal favour and endearments, in the glitter of jewels, rank and fortune. I should mar your court with my foolish prejudices: humiliate it with my foolish pride; slight it in my ridiculous innocence. This is why I doom myself to obscurity and poverty; why I do not even await the issue of the lawsuit in which I am engaged and which I feel that I am no longer able to continue; why I accept for my dear ones the poverty which blemishes my father's name, but which, at the worst, will not stain our family name. Farewell, my lord. We may never meet again. In the retreat where I shall live between labour and prayer, I promise to remember you only from our first meeting, and I shall force myself to forget how sadly a nobleman mistook me and insulted me as the king has no right to do. For, granting that he loved me, at least he did not offend me by proposing I should be his mistress."

While Aurore was speaking in this high and noble strain, Aramis was listening. When he had fully reflected, he was ready to play a fresh card. He was now a more dangerous plotter than when he conceived to substitute one royal brother for another at Vaux. When Mdlle. du Tremblay walked with a firm step to the door, she found he had glided in between, and a complete change had taken place on his countenance. Tears moistened his eyes; his lineaments expressed a

joyous emotion without equal; his voice quivered as he said, in turning to the girl with a supplicating gesture:

“ Oh, my child, my dear child, how happy you have made me. How greatly I admire you! How great is my love and my esteem!”

Before such a sudden outburst, Aurore receded and uttered not a syllable, but her face was eloquent in its profound amaze.

“ To think that I was on the verge of doubting you. Yes, I doubted you—I confess—but only for a space. I feared that you would succumb to the test.”

“ Test? was that a test?” exclaimed the girl.

Aramis lowered his head with a chagrined air, and replied in a reproachful tone:

“ Could you not see through it all? true, true, I tried you too much—much too far! But I wished to know the whole.” He took her by the hand and led her to the sofa. “ I vowed to ascertain your secret. And what have I met but the purest honour, and all that embellishes and sanctifies the heart of woman?”

Aurore was still repeating: “ A test?” for she distrusted yet. “ So,” she said slowly, “ what you said but now——”

“ Was mere fable, of which I beg you no more to think——”

“ The king——”

“ The king holds no other feelings towards you than any gallant gentleman may declare to any honourable girl—and he is now casting off the Marchioness de Montespan solely to be disentangled as regards the queen. Alas!” he went on, with a sad shaking of the head, “ this court, into whose hot breath you have but stepped, must quickly and fatally absorb the purest minds, for you to believe that an old man with white hair like me was capable of descending to pander even for a king. Ah!” continued he, “ you have misunderstood me! How sharply you have punished me by putting faith in a ruse of which I had not foreseen

the effects ! ” Again his tone and expression altered, while he added with a touch of vanity admirably assumed : “ I grant that I played my part well. Condemn me if you will, but own that you were my dupe.”

She laid a hand on her heart.

“ You caused me much pain,” she sighed.

“ Still again,” he said, drawing her to him with a fatherly action, “ overlook this. It was that deuced professional pride of ours. We diplomatists fall into such a habit of deceiving and feigning——”

In the pause, the duke secretly observed the girl. At the end of a minute, she raised her lovely, clear and ingenuous eyes and questioned :

“ Why was this test made ? ”

The ex-musketeer’s teeth were impressed on his lip.

“ Why did you put yourself to so much trouble ? ” persisted Aurore. “ Why cause me so much pain ? ”

In the time it took her to frame the questions, he had shaped his reply.

“ Do you mean to tell me that you cannot guess ? ” She shook her head. “ What, you have not reflected that the righteous aim I had, justified my plan ? It was necessary for the queen’s future peace that she should not again harbour a viper at her side. How many innocent-seeming creatures have sought to mount into the royal favour by first obtaining a hold in the queen’s service ? these would have thrown aside the devoted lover who was of lowly birth compared with the ruler of France : but you on the contrary trample on everything between you and the object of the great and holy love filling your heart. I was in my right in asking if in uniting you to that object, I should not expose myself to hearing you reproach me some day for having been the key-stone of your happiness, if not of your golden fortune. And he whom you choose will share your scruples. He may be one who shrinks lest you blame him for the humility of his line being an obstacle to your rising with him to where you are law-

fully free to aspire—your longings are legitimate for luxury, fame and grandeur. Thus thinking, I tried to tempt you, and the experiment has fully succeeded, at least. You have refused a throne to keep yourself for the man of your heart. What more convincing proof can I desire of an affection and disinterestedness which nothing in the future can have the power to weaken?"

The girl's features had at length brightened. Her youthful beauty seemed to send out rays.

"My lord," she faltered, "you are speaking of Joel."

"Why, of whom else was I to speak save the lucky dog who has the inestimable chance of being distinguished by such a treasure?" rejoined the old duke, with liveliness.

"Do you know, then, what has become of him all this month?"

"Do I know?"

Truth obliges us to admit that Aramis did not have the faintest clue; but a diplomatist of his mark ought never to be caught napping.

"You have seen him?" inquired Mdlle. du Tremblay.

"As you will see him before a great while. But," he added guardedly, "you must ask him for the explanation of his mysterious absence."

"Will he come here?"

"Of course," replied the duke, with a good-natured smile, "he will be forced to come, unless you want to have the wedding celebrated elsewhere."

"Wedding?"

"That follows since I told you I had made up my mind to make you both happy."

Aurore fixed on him a steady gaze.

"Has M. Joel found what he was seeking, then?" she inquired.

This was not a question for which Almada was pre-

pared and he was disconcerted; he mused: "What on earth can she mean?" But he was obliged to reply, and do so at once, as the girl's eyes were imperiously questioning him. "He has found it," he said with assurance. "But not without difficulty, and the task took time."

"But you aided him, I will engage?" proceeded the other with a sincere flow of thankfulness.

"How inquisitive you are, child!" he retorted, shaking a finger at her. "Nothing can be hidden from you. Well, yes, I aided him with all my power."

She held out her hand.

"How I thank you if, with heaven's help, Joel has found a name?"

"So, so!" thought the ex-prelate. "It is a name he is after? Our loving swain has come to find or make a name in Paris. Well, let us give him one for a present, which will rob no one—A name?" he exclaimed, "A title more like—Chevalier de Locmaria! That sounds all right, as he comes from Belle-Isle, where I had reason to remember Locmaria, one of my parishes. And—" here a cloud passed over his brow, "was it not in one of its caves that my poor Porthos died?"

He looked so serious that she forbore to speak, but, recovering, he said:

"But I wish to leave your betrothed the pleasure of telling you what has happened to him since your parting. The chevalier will be beside you in a few days; for it is a settled thing that you will remain at court?" But Aurore's face wore alarm and repugnance, and he persisted: "You must, my child. The queen has much need of one like you. The poor lady has not a soul near her to whom she can confide her woes. The friendship which she will inevitably accord you, and the high esteem in which the king holds you, will help you to a reconciliation of the couple

which all desire, and which will be a benefit to the state."

"My lord, I shall remain."

"Ere long besides you will rest on a husband's arm. I will do my utmost to obtain the consent of their majesties to the marriage. They will feel pleasure in signing the contract as witnesses, and as a kind of wedding present, I warrant the Chevalier of Locmaria will receive some rank which will allow him to be near you. But," he went on, looking at his watch, "the hour is striking for you to go on duty, and I myself have an appointment with the king on his leaving the council-room. Let us part, my dear Aurore."

She held up her forehead which he lightly kissed, murmuring "I might easily be your grandfather!" At the threshold, he called: "You will shortly see me. With *him*! Meanwhile, be so kind as not to forget me in your prayers."

"Rest assured of that, my good lord," returned the girl. "In my heart you have a place like God and Joel."

CHAPTER XVII

A ROYAL FAVOUR

WHILST the palace of St. Germain was being renovated by the famous Mansard, a covered way around the building was replaced by a verandah, which was called the gallery. Here, on coming from the Council of State, Louis XIV. was accustomed to receive applicants for favours, and those for whom he had communications. Here Almada proceeded after quitting our heroine.

On his way from Montausier House to the palace, the old duke distributed to the passer-by nods and smiles, which betrayed the former church dignitary. Nobody would have suspected the turmoil in his brain and the mental labour he underwent, to see his smiling mien,

the gallant and yet guarded looks at the pretty women, and the exquisite art with which he graduated the marks of politeness according to the rank of those he met.

"This Joel must be found again," he mused as he strolled in the sunshine in order to warm himself. "I have promised her so. It is the only way to save the situation of affairs bungled by the monstrous innocence of this young girl, whom I have arrived in time to place in the contest for the favourite's vacated post. For the purpose of retaining this virgin at the court, it will be highly necessary that she should not leave St. Germain. It is certain that the king cherishes her under his heart-wing, and I will stake my life he has asked me hither this morning to speak to me about her. Yes, but where am I to find this young rustic? He will hamper my projects and, absent, he may upset them. Just think that I believed I knew all about the weaker sex from having half-a-century's experience with them, and this one puzzles me. By Jove! as I used to swear when I wore a sword by my side, to see me beaten by a silly maid's scruples—I, who was the lover of the creature called the Duchess de Chevreuse; the confidential friend of Queen Anne of Austria in her amour with the Duke of Buckingham: the dashing, lady-killing musketeer; the priest-confessor of a bevy of fashionable penitents; the beholder, if not the actor, of all the merry intrigues which enlivened the end of the last reign and the beginning of this. It is true that I never met any such squeamishness in the Duchess, or the Queen, or Mazarin, or my penitents, or Fouquet's lady-loves, or the early love-conquests of this king. All the same, a philosopher—it might be me—was very right in saying that woman is capable of anything—even of doing good and acting well."

On entering the gallery, the first person whom the Spanish Ambassador caught sight of was Lord Nicholas de Lareynie, Lieutenant-General of the Royal Police. Under his arm was a large portfolio, stuffed

with papers of all kinds. The new-comer walked up to him, and said after the exchange of the usual courtesies:

“My lord, since you are the very man who best knows everything going on in the capital, pray try to enlighten me on the fate of a fine young fellow, who much interests me, and who has been missing this month.”

“My lord duke, I am devotedly yours.”

“This youth has lately arrived from his province of Brittany. From Belle-Isle, if I am rightly informed: honest of face, costume of his country, the figure and bearing of a young athlete. He wears by his side a sword of exceptional size, in fact the longest sword but one, that I ever saw in my life.”

“Oh!” exclaimed the magistrate in surprise, “this strange story put me in mind of an acquaintance. I declare, it would be odd if you were seeking the very man of whom I come to confer with his majesty. He had arms which would throw down a wall, eh?”

“That agrees.”

“He answers to the name of Joel, too?”

It was now the duke's turn to be surprised.

“Joel—it is so. Do you know where he is?”

“He is in the Bastille.”

“What!”

“In proof of which, I have had the governor's deputy asking me in what style he is to be treated. You may not be unaware, duke, that at the Bastille, each prisoner receives fare and accommodation according to his position.”

The old friend of the late governor did know this, and interrupting the police lieutenant, he asked:

“But why was the poor lad lodged in jail?”

“A very serious case,” answered Lareynie, scratching his wig; “violation of the edicts, a duel ending in a man's death—this poor lad, as you call him, in plain, ran a musketeer officer through the body.”

"Heaven forbid?"

"As a matter of course, he was arrested, and the constabulary opened an inquiry into the matter; but as he could not supply proofs that he was nobly born, these judges of points of honour would not derogate to try him, and we are all in a muddle. In what court is he to be tried? I have come to have his majesty's idea on the subject."

As he spoke the functionary drew from his pocket a sheet of parchment. He handed this document to the duke, saying: "Would you mind looking over it?"

Aramis had no objection. Thus he knew all that had befallen our hero. He had finished when the king came out of his room, with an air of good humour. On his entering the gallery, Lareynie started to hand him the report on the Joel case, which the ambassador had returned to him; but the monarch, who had perceived his companion, said: "Presently," and taking the envoy of Spain by the arm, he observed; "I am obliged to you for keeping the appointment."

"Thanks, sire," rejoined the old courtier, making a low bow, "the wishes of the sovereign is law to me. Moreover," he added, after a pause, "if your majesty had not deigned to evince his intention of meeting me this morning, I should nevertheless have waited to see him come by—having accepted from him the office to offer homage to which I venture to hope the recipient will not show herself altogether insensible."

"Homage?"

"I mean by that! to bear to her the expression of feeling with which overflows towards him the most sincere and grateful hearts."

The ruler's cheeks were scarlet, and his eyes sparkled with deep satisfaction.

"Ah, you have seen Mdle. du Tremblay?" he greedily inquired.

"I have just come from her," replied the diploma-

tist, smiling to himself at having so swiftly guessed how things stood.

“Then, she does not seem very much displeased with her new position?”

“Ah, sire, it is more than gratitude which she professes towards your majesty, but adoration, poorly constrained by the bounds of respect owed by the subject to her sovereign. Yesterday she was stunned and abashed. Think how little she expected the honour of which she was the object! And then her heart's transports were paralysed by the union of gladness, perplexity, amazement, and confusion before the king and the queen, and the whole court whose bold curiosity, in a way of speaking, distracted her. But, this morning, after a night passed in a fever of excitement, with what eloquence had she spoken of her royal benefactor! with what ardour she declared to me her devotion to her royal mistress and her worship for her master! with what emotion and passion she repeated to me on my leaving: ‘Oh, my lord duke, the king is the most generous as he is the most noble of his gentlemen in the kingdom.’”

“Did she speak in that strain?” interrogated Louis, his voice trembling with pleasure.

“And when I merely asked her what had most struck her in the brilliant assemblage which she saw for the first time yesterday, you should have heard with what freedom and simplicity she responded: ‘Do not question me, for I do not know how to answer. I saw none but the king, and I am dazzled like the rash creature who looks up at the sun.’”

These words were too much like those which poor Louise de la Vallière uttered, in the hearing of the king, twenty years before, under the Royal Oak at Fontainebleau, for the hearer not to recall that scene. All the sweet savour of youth returned with its freshness and sharpness, though saddening, like the per-

fume from a leaf, found dried in a book. But the memory was sufficient.

"For this girl is purity itself," continued Almada. "Her soul knows no more of falsehood than her lips. It is one detached from all earthly lust, the sanctuary of all lofty aspirations and sublime devotion. She is as strange to coquetry as to kisses."

In hearing the ambassador, the king was intoxicated with the prospect of future conquest. This affection, mingled with respect, and a dread that made the woman prostrate herself before its object, was a dish of spice for one who liked rare delicacies. What flattery could equal, in his eyes, the being taken for a demi-god? But as he strove above all to seem to be beyond human weakness, he forced himself to dissimulate under a mask of ordinary pleasure the joy and pride which lifted him to the seventh heaven.

"My lord," he resumed after a short silence, "it is precisely of Mdlle. du Tremblay that I wanted to speak with you. She belongs to a family of faithful servants whom we have wrongfully neglected for some time. Were the members still in existence, rewards in proportion to their services would certainly seek the obscurity into which their modesty retained them until their demise. In this girl we shall repair the involuntary harm caused her parents by our ungrateful forgetfulness. Mdlle. du Tremblay shall be a lady of our new palace."

"But, sire, the rule is that the husband shall be the wearer of the honours which carry this title," remonstrated the duke.

"We will provide a husband worthy of our royal ward, and we count upon your aid in this respect."

"Oh, sire, how your majesty divines one's wishes! I was proposing to lead the king's solicitude upon the isolated state of this poor girl! it was my design to supplicate my prince to give her a protector and place her in a family."

"This is just what I shall do, and we charge you to find among our nobility some gentleman who merits obtaining such a treasure, and in the wedding presents shall be a title for the chosen one to some post in our household."

The ambassador smiled as he replied: "There is no need of that, for I have at hand a young friend who will only be too happy to unite his fate with that of the amiable lady whom your majesty honours with his bounty. It is a Breton gentleman without ambition or attachment."

"What is his name?"

"It is the Chevalier de Locmaria, if your majesty will allow him that title."

"He shall be the Chevalier de Locmaria."

"Only, I am not going to conceal from your majesty that he has a wild and rough character, totally unsuited for life at court, and would, I daresay, prefer to make his way in the army."

"Let it be so, then—he shall have a chance."

"And if there be fighting going on, he would gladly go to the front."

"Well, we will send him to Marshal Créqui, who is operating against Prince Charles of Lorraine."

"Good! he will be pleased, I know that he is a lover of battle and hungry for danger and glory. All he desires is a chance to distinguish himself before the enemy and he will not shrink from doing his duty." He paused, but had said all that was necessary,

The two had returned to the part of the gallery whence they started, and Lareynie was patiently waiting instructions."

"Sire," remarked Almada, "your police lieutenant is waiting for the proper moment to have an audience granted, and I should feel ashamed to retain the king any longer."

"Oh," said Louis, looking at the scroll held out to him, "This relates to the individual we have been

speaking about. A bold rogue, by my faith! How is it he has not yet been tried?"

The Spanish Ambassador interrupted Lareynie about to reply. "Sire, it has long been said that clemency is the brightest jewel of monarchs."

"On my soul, duke," said the king, eyeing him with astonishment, "Are you going to intercede on behalf of this bully——"

"I venture upon doing so,"

"You are going to ask me to pardon this rebel?"

"I crave more than that—his immediate liberty."

"But he is a murderer!"

"Hence I apply to the royal generosity."

"Think what you are doing," said the king, stiffening his bearing and tone. "Put the fellow at liberty who has trampled on our signature at the foot of the edicts—killed one of our military servants—and has not even the excuse that he is of noble blood."

"Ah," returned the ambassador placidly, "it is allowable for a Breton, fresh from his native place, not to know all the edicts——"

"Eh, is the rascal a Breton?" asked the king, softening his voice.

"As for his nobility, that is rather obscure—but he can be ennobled at any time by your majesty. As for the dead musketeer, there is no lack of them, your majesty having two companies, each five hundred strong. Besides, judging by the statement, this unfortunate M. de Bregy was not the best sample of French chivalry——"

"But still his murderer——"

"Adversary, if you will allow it——"

"Well, be it so—his adversary seems very dear to you?"

"Not the least in the world; I hardly know him, and only met him once, but he is useful to me, and that is saying much."

"Useful? in what way?"

Almada looked at the speaker and replied, lowering his voice:

“If it please your majesty, I should make him the Knight of Locmaria, and the husband of Mdle. du Tremblay.”

CHAPTER XVIII

BOSOM COMPANIONS

BUT it is now time to return to our good friend Joel. Our readers may take it for granted that we shall find him where we left him, as the Bastille guarded its prisoners with an abundance of ditches, ramparts, bars, bolts, locks, warders, soldiers, and spies for any one to go forth unobserved, unless he wore wings.

Joel was imprisoned in one of the eight towers called the Basinière. His cell was on the third floor.

At first, the unhappy youth was like one stunned by the violence of the shock which befel him: motionless, dazed, he had no sight but the terrible state prison whose name the jailer had shouted on leaving him. Shaking himself at last like one casting aside the effects of a nightmare, he had looked around and made the circuit of his room—which did not take long. Instinct being strong, he went to the window for air and light—a small loop-hole, doubly grated with thick iron bars.

Poor Joel!

This robust countryman, habituated to inhale the pure air as he raced over the heaths or on the beach, in the forests or along the cliffs, was now reduced to draw breath through a mere crevice. It was not wide enough for him to insert his head. He could barely see a patch of sky on which nothing was outlined—not even a tree-top, a weathercock, or a column of smoke. He examined the worm-eaten table, covered with a worn cloth, which, with a bed and a stool, formed the

furniture. He felt the bed, which struck him as hard, and finally returned to a seat on the stool, where he gave himself up to melancholy reflections.

He was in jail, with every possibility of being condemned to death! in that quarter, no illusion was possible: the crime was evident, the law formal; the tribunal would surely sentence the culprit, and there were nine chances and a half that the king would sign the death warrant. But our hero did not desire death; he longed to live, and particularly deplored the possibility of its being cut short because of how he had meant to employ it: in accomplishing the task imposed by his mother, and afterwards in consecrating himself to making his beloved happy.

But in the midst of his higher, holier thoughts, nature asserted itself—Joel became hungry, thirsty and in need of rest. When his food was brought to him, a copious one and well served, it must be admitted, which showed that the spirit of the former governor (Baisemeaux) still haunted the prison—he ate like a famished wolf. The furniture was poor but the provender good. After which he flung himself on the couch and slept as soundly as if he had been in the guest-room of the "Blackamoor" lulled by the ceaseless prattle of little Friquet.

It was daylight when he awoke, and he had some difficulty in remembering where he was. But a glance on the surrounding walls was sufficient. As this confirmation drew a sigh from him the turnkey walked in and said:

"Exercise-time, master. If you come up to the tower top you can get some air that beats anything down below. You can have a chat with your fellow-prisoners, which will stir you up a bit." As he guided the new-comer through the maze of stairs and lobbies, he added: "Besides, you will not make any long acquaintances as it appears that your trial will come off very soon. The major bade me announce that the

recorder would be here to communicate the decree to-morrow."

The exercise took place on the "leads," or roof. As there were five stories, a prisoner to each, Joel met four going up aloft. On their countenances and clothes one could almost read the date of their imprisonment. Two of them were men of middle age and were insignificant. The third was a man of middle stature, square-shouldered and strongly built; he had a round, good-humoured face, with a languid eye and silly smile; in short, the aspect of a citizen, rather idiotic. The last was an old man, with long white locks and beard in disorder and clothes in tatters.

On our hero emerging into this sky-parlour, the first three eagerly asked:

"What's the latest news from Paris?"

"Well, gentlemen," was Joel's reply, "I am sorry I cannot satisfy you, because of being arrested when I had scarcely more than arrived from the country."

"You were arrested!"

"Yes. You do not imagine I came here for the pleasure of this promenade, do you!"

"But what were you arrested for?" inquired the fellow prisoner.

Joel related his adventure, at the termination of which the other remarked with a doleful wagging of the head: "By our Lady, your case looks black indeed. The king does not joke with duellists. However, you have the advantage of knowing what you are here for."

"And the other prisoners?" quickly asked Joel.

"Well, I do not know why I am here."

"Nor I."

"Neither do I."

The new-comer did not like to put the question to the old man, but as he looked at him inquisitively, the latter spoke.

"I am sorry for you, my gentleman," said he in a

grave voice. "You will certainly suffer the fate of those executed for the same offence. The cardinal has no pity."

"What cardinal!" inquired the Breton.

The other stared at him with astonishment.

"Can there be any other than his Red Eminence, Cardinal Richelieu?"

"Bless us! he has been dead nearly thirty years!"

"Are you quite sure?"

"And his successor, Cardinal Mazarin, is in the same state."

"But there is a King Louis XIII. yet?"

"No, he died before the latter and followed the former into the grave."

"Excuse me, monsieur," said the old man politely, "I did not know of these events, having entered here in the year of the birth of that king's first-born."

Our hero shuddered, for he had not spent as many hours in prison as this wretch had years. Still, of all the prisoners, this one seemed the most calm and resigned. In the evening, when the warder brought the supper, he asked who the aged man was.

"His number is 68," responded the man carelessly.

"And the others?"

"Oh, they are 141, 136, and 123."

The key-bearer condescended to explain that the prisoners of the Bastille lost their names on entering and were distinguished merely by numbers; but the servants knew not the motives for their detention, and the governor would not in most cases know unless he himself questioned them. In many cases, however, they knew as little as himself.

"Then, I have a number, too?" queried Joel.

"Not yet," replied the turnkey, "for you are an exception. It has not been seen fit to supply you with one, as it does not look as though you would be here very long;—it is given out," he added, with a grin, "you will have your head off next week."

Next day, as had been foretold, the prisoner saw, entering his room with the gravity of his office, Master Chamonin, Chief Recorder of the Constabulary. He deigned to inform our captive that he was under watch and ward because of his attire, his appearance and the extreme length of his sword. The St. Germain forest-keepers had been struck by his height and broad chest, his Breton breeches, the peacock's feather in his hat, the unusual length of his rapier, as well as his wild bearing and unsteady step—and having guessed he was the slayer of Corporal Bregy, whose body they were charged to convey to the town, they had hastened to furnish his description to Lareynie's spies. Thus they were enabled to follow him into the "Blackamoor" Inn at Paris.

The four musketeers had refused to give any information on the case, as well as on the survivor of the meeting except to declare that everything had taken place according to the code of honour.

Chamonin called upon the accused to set forth his proofs of nobility so that he might be tried by his peers, the noblemen composing the tribunal of honour. As the Son of Porthos answered in full sincerity that, while believing himself of blue blood, he had nothing but his word and belief to establish it, the worthy recorder retired with the sentence:

"You will not be beheaded, but hanged."

At the closing of this conference, Joel went upon the roof. At first he was alone, as it rained and the guests of the Bastille preferred their cells to bad weather. Chamonin's declaration had clouded our hero in look and heart. He had once seen an execution, by hanging, and the scene had remained in the young man's memory and it made him shudder now after years. And it was this ignoble, infamous, horrible death which was reserved for him!

For the purpose of changing his ideas, he strove through the rain to find among the houses of the city,

the Church of St. Paul, where Mdlle. du Tremblay attended evening service, and the Grey House in the St. Jacques suburb where Aurore now was. Whilst absorbed in this way, a hand was laid on his shoulder. He turned sharply.

It was one of the four other lodgers in the tower, who had approached without his hearing him. Joel did not recognise him at once.

"What do you want?" he said roughly.

"I am Number 141, to serve you, if I may, sir," rejoined the old fellow gently. "A prisoner like yourself, a fellow-lodger in this strong box where the king keeps those he wishes held in hand. I occupy the cell above you."

"Well?"

"I mean to say that I am lodged in the fourth floor—not an unpleasant place, but I am going to leave it."

"Changing your cell?"

"No, I am going to get out of it," returned the man, jestingly.

"Released?"

"Not exactly. I am going to try to escape to-night," continued the confidential acquaintance in a low whisper.

"Escape?" repeated Joel.

"Speak lower!" said the prisoner, grasping him by the arm. "You will spoil all. Here of all places the walls have ears. Yes," he went on, "I shall be out to-night. Heaven is my witness that I should like to take you with me, but I have misgivings mingled with my hopes."

"Tell me how you are going to manage it?" questioned the Breton, his curiosity excited to the highest pitch.

"With patience, skill and tools, in time. With instruments and assistance from without very quickly. I have a daughter who is my life, my joy, all I care to live for. She has a lover who has come to my aid with

all I need. I have a file and a rope. I have sawn my two window-bars so that they will readily snap, leaving an opening through which I can get through. Towards midnight, I will tie my cord to the remaining bar and lower myself on it as it hangs. In such bad weather as impends, I may have the luck of the sentry, stationed below, keeping in his watch box. If he be outside, worse luck! he will fire on me. If missed, I shall leap from the rampart into the moat, swim across, climb the other side and try to steal into one of the houses by the garrets, unless I can climb down a gutterpipe."

"But surely you run the risk of breaking your neck," remonstrated the Breton.

The other snapped his fingers; he had dropped the mask of stupid content, and his heretofore dim eye darted a flame which would have made the boldest recoil. His companion felt singular uneasiness in parleying with this double-face: it was certainly not fright so much as it was repugnance.

"What is your object in behaving so confidentially with me?" he inquired.

"Well, because you would not betray me; I read it in your face. We are a family of wizards, fortune-tellers and so-forth. And again, because I have a favour to ask of you. As you have said, I run many risks; I might be recaptured, but I will die first. It is for my daughter's sake that I risk all. It is to see her—to embrace her that I will attempt this night the enterprise which to you appears so hazardous, and to me the more as I never put the faith in her sweetheart which she feels. This supply of the means to make my escape may be but a trap in which I shall meet death,—but I shall foil the plotter, if the man is false, by constituting you my executor to convey my inheritance to my child."

"What!" exclaimed Joel, shrinking from the strange request.

The prisoner drew from within his garments a brass box, about the size and shape of a large coin.

"This," he proceeded: "contains a paper for which my enemies would pay a fortune. For my Therese it will be a power to defend her. Up to the present I have managed to hide it. If found on me, it will be destroyed, and so this case must not leave your hands but to be put into my daughter's hands——"

"It is impossible," responded the Breton, "How am I to fulfill such a mission?"

"I have a presentiment that you will go from this place more easily than I, and not to your death. Even if you were doomed to death, you are not one of those dangerous criminals who are made to disappear in the dark lest they shout out on the scaffold some destructive secret. You will be regularly tried; the court may apply some dreadful punishment to you, but your exceptional situation will command some alleviation. A duellist is not one of those malefactors who horrify or are scorned. You have relatives or friends with whom you can communicate; your legal defender can confer with you; you may ask a favour of your guards or bribe a keeper. When sentenced, you will be allowed to say farewell to your dear ones. Thus it will be through one of these chances that you will be able to pass this treasure to my daughter, unless you prefer to give it her directly by summoning her to you."

"Something like this might be done," replied the squire: "but——"

"But?" retorted the prisoner, with warmth, "would you refuse to help a wretch who has no hope but in you to preserve an innocent girl from woes without end?"

"Since you insist so strongly," said Joel, touched in spite of himself, "I will consent to what you ask."

"Oh, yes—indeed, do—in the name of all you love!"

"Enough," said Joel, thinking of Aurore; "give me the box."

"You promise to return it to me or to have it delivered into the girl's hands?"

"I promise to do everything in my power."

"I believe you. Heaven prompts me. You will hand over the box without looking at the contents?"

"It is fastened up securely."

"That may be mastered: the case broken——"

"What do you take me for?" protested the Son of Porthos, repulsing the suggestion.

"Nay, I am unfair! pardon me! misfortune makes me distrustful. Take it, but hide it from all eyes."

"Be assured. I will wear it round my neck under my clothes. But what is the name of your daughter? where am I to go to deliver this article or send it to her?"

"My daughter's name is Therese Lesage; she lives in the middle of the Rue Bouloi, and carries on business, I am informed, as the Manicarde, or fortune-teller—it is our hereditary trade."

This, then, was the soothsayer whom the Marchioness de Montespan and her two companions had visited on the night when Joel had made those ladies' acquaintance; but he did not know the name of the street or on what errand they were out so late. The mention conveyed no hint to him.

"I will remember, and the likelihood is that I shall not be searched as I am not suspected of harbouring state secrets."

"Oh, sir," said the other, with a false note or two in his voice, "if ever I can—or if my Therese can repay you for me——"

"I give you a free receipt, my companion, and the same to your daughter. But one word more: if your project succeeds to-night, as I trust heartily it may——"

"Be easy: if I am free, I will manage to see you and recover the article."

At this moment the warder's voice was heard: "Time! come down, all out on exercise!"

Our hero mechanically held out his hand to the other, saying: "We must part. Good luck! Before sleeping to-night, I shall pray for your success."

The old man's face twitched and he rejoined with bitterness:

"You are luckier than I am in being able to pray and sleep. I thank you for the honour," he added, rejecting the hand, "but not till we meet again."

"In the next world, then," rejoined Joel gravely: "for my opinion is that both of us are in the shadow of death."

Number 141 ironically shrugged his shoulders.

"As you please," returned he, with a sneering laugh: "But, as you are a good man and I a great sinner, I do not believe it will be in paradise."

Despite Joel's assurance about his ability to sleep, midnight came and he had not closed an eye: the talk with the father of Therese Lesage kept him awake.

Not that he was completely interested in Number 141: the shifting and equivocal expressions on his features instinctively shocked our loyal hero, and he divined a dangerous rogue beneath the skilful deceiver. Still, in thinking of the perils the unhappy man was about to confront to reach his daughter and recover liberty, the young man could not stifle compassion or prevent forming vows for the enigmatical person's success in the task, for at least he gave proof of bravery.

Outside, the storm blew more and more bitterly and violently. The wind played about the old tower with the howlings of wild beasts. The dashes of water drummed on the walls till they returned a continuous dull beating. Midnight rang from the great clock of the

prison, incessantly reminding the prisoners how the hours of punishment went.

Joel kept his eyes riveted on the loophole over the foot of his bed. It seemed a light spot in the prevailing gloom. Suddenly, it was partly eclipsed by an opaque body: it was the prisoner lowering himself from his cell above.

At this juncture the gale delivered a furious assault upon the walls. It seemed as if it were determined to tear the old fortress from the ground, and bear it away on its wings like a shingle from a roof.

The prayer of Breton seamen in a tempest involuntarily rose to the watcher's lips. Some minutes elapsed, long as centuries, until a gunshot cracked amid the crash of the unchained elements. A great tumult arose as though everybody in the prison were awakened; there was running about and shouting, orders sounded on all sides, and voices called "To arms!"

When the warder entered his room in the morning, Joel asked what had happened during the night.

"I could not close my eyes. What an uproar there was with the storm, and you fellows rushing about, and shouting, and shooting——"

"It was an attempt to escape," replied Huguenin.

"Which of the prisoners?"

"Your neighbour overhead, Number 141, who sawed his window bars and slid down a rope from them. But when the ground was reached, the sentry there challenged him, and as the fugitive only set to jumping the moat, he obeyed his orders by firing on him."

"And then?"

The jailer puffed as if blowing out a candle.

"Number 141 is no more—gone off—killed with a bullet in the head."

Joel, who had begun his breakfast, put down the glass carried to his lips.

"Heaven rest his soul!" he exclaimed.

"It is more certain that they will have it in the other place," replied the turnkey, shrugging his shoulders, "for he was a thorough rogue. A hundred times he ought to have laid down his life, broken on the wheel, or lashed to death, or in the halter——"

"What was the nature of his offence?"

The jailer was in a talkative mood this morning.

"It happens that he is the very one of my lodgers whose tale I do know," he rambled on. "Desgrais, the police officer who brought him in, told me all about it. His name is Pierre Lesage, said to have been a priest in the house of Montmorency, but that was merely a blind—he is a half-gipsy, thief, beggar, horse-doctor and horse-thief, vendor of all sorts of abominable poisons. It is a sure thing that he was a wool-dealer at Rouen before he became the principal partner in the wicked deeds of the famous poisoners, La Voisin, Filastre and Vigoureux, three witches whom the Chambre Ardent soon made a finish with. Their victims are said to be reckoned by the hundred, and high and mighty folks employed them."

"But how came it that he did not suffer the same fate as his accomplices?"

"That is a little secret—they feared that he would raise his voice so loud in an open court that the public would hear strange things, the names of their employers, very great personages, do you see?"

He winked significantly.

"So the police lieutenant suppressed the ugly business, and it was considered sufficient to imprison him in our tower."

"Which was not strong enough to hold him," said the Breton.

"Nay, there is nothing the matter with the tower," said Huguenin, assuming a sly and mysterious air, "He had tools to break out, but do not you run away with the idea that they were smuggled in without our

knowing all about that. Why, I was charged to mark each day how he was getting on with the work—while he was strolling about with the rest of you aloft. It took a long time, for the bars are good stuff, but he came to an end, whereupon I notified Major du Junca. The bird was about to take flight! So the sentry was warned, the best marksman we have in the garrison, and he earned his ten pistoles, by breaking that thorn in the foot of many a lofty one at court, beginning with Marchioness de Montespan."

"Zounds!" exclaimed Joel, thinking to himself that he knew now why he had a feeling of dislike to the murdered prisoner, when their hands touched. The locket on his breast burned him, as though heated white hot by a flame from a furnace, and twenty times in the day he felt like tearing it off and smashing it under his heel. But the idea that he had given his promise stopped him, for his mother had always said:

"Do not lightly pass your word: but be a slave to it when it is given, even to a knave."

All day long, the memory and the speech of Pierre Lesage haunted him.

"Comrade, did that villain leave a family?" he asked of the warder that evening at supper-time.

"Which one?" inquired the man, who had already forgotten the morning's conversation.

"Number 141, killed last night."

"I hardly know—wait a bit! Yes, there was something said by the police officer about a daughter of his, whose mother was La Voisin—who lives with one of the gang who eluded justice."

"Some frightful old hag like her mother?"

"I cannot tell you any more, as I never saw the girl. If she is not in Paris, I am not required to travel the world over after her. And yet," he said with a change of mind, "I should like to know what has become of her."

CHAPTER XIX

A MYSTERIOUS TRANSACTION

SOME days went by without bringing our prisoner any news of his case. In the third week he began to fret. In his native home he used to employ his time from dawn in hunting, shooting, rambling, riding, all those athletic pursuits which had become as much a necessity as the air and the light. Since he came to town his days had been filled with adventures of all kinds. And out of this free and happy state of things he was dropped into the monotony of a prison life. The vital fluid, boiling in his veins, had no longer any outlet; it rushed to his head and made his arteries beat as if he had a fever. He remained whole hours sitting on his stool, his legs crossed, and his chin held in his hand, staring idly.

When night came, he would throw himself on his couch, closing his eyes but merely dozing as he viewed extraordinary visions: and it was not till morning that he went off into a deep slumber, in which was engendered some incoherent dream. He had wings sprout out upon him like a bird's or a bat's, and he flew out of his window: but at the time he was passing over the outer wall, he fell into fathomless abysses or he was shot, and he woke up with a throbbing heart, his chest panting, and his forehead streaming with sweat.

As soon as he awoke he would pace his room like a bear patrolling his cage, until, tired out, he would, as before, sit upon the stool, with swinging hands, wondering to God and man what he had done that One should abandon him and the other maltreat him.

One day when he was thus mooning his time away, an unusual stir in his lobby was audible. Soldiers were presenting arms; steps approached his door; the key

grated in the lock and the bolts were shot back: Major du Junca walked in.

He was the acting-governor, awaiting the king's filling up the post left vacant by death. Making his monthly inspection, he demanded if the prisoner had any complaint to make.

"I want for nothing, except the certainty about what is to be done with me," returned the Son of Porthos. "This ignorance in which I am left about my fate is downright cruel."

"That is my opinion," said the deputy-governor, "and I propose writing to M. Lareynie to solicit orders about you. The police lieutenant will probably refer to the king, and as soon as the reply comes, I will hasten to transmit it to you."

"I hope this reply will speedily arrive! and may my departure be soon from this prison-house where my stay is daily torture! I am eager to go forth, though it be between the chaplain and the executioner."

"Oh, sir; I trust you will not be reduced to that extremity," protested the major; "the king will not rear again the scaffold on which perished the noble Bouteville. He may rather merely *forget* you are here."

"Forget me, like Lesage the poisoner," thought Joel, wincing; "But that is just what I do not want to happen."

"Sir, it is not what you wish, but what the king likes," observed the major.

"Well," resumed our hero, "the king makes a mistake if he thinks he is doing me a favour in leaving me in this hole instead of having my head chopped off."

"Hole?" repeated the deputy-governor in a sulky tone; "the king never makes an error. I shall have the honour to announce his decision when it comes." He bowed, and withdrew with the four musketeers who served as guard and the turnkey.

This time it seemed to the captive that the door

banged with a mournful sound, and he felt undoubtedly a prisoner. He sank without strength on the stool, and fastened his lifeless eyes on the door which shut out all hope. He shrank mentally and began to muse on his dead mother and his living love. Stories of distinguished captives in his historical prison came to worry him. Nearly all knew their crimes. But this old man met at exercise, who had grown white here without friends to sue for his release, or pester the royal ministers! If so lone, why was he kept here: why in forty years have made no attempt to escape?

"It seems to me," mused Joel, "that in forty years, I should have made forty trials to get out. Indeed, why should I not try now?"

He had no friends, true or false, to pass him tools like the betrayed Lesage, but he might convert the bars, if broken, into some kind of instrument.

He proceeded to examine his room straight away. The door was of three-foot oak plank: the window was doubly grated; the walls were four-foot thick as he had noticed. All this did not leave great hopes. He tried to shake the door; a number of bolts and bars answered for its solidity, to say nothing of the whole series being on the outside; on the inside was not one nailhead or nut; so that the spikes and bolts could not be moved. He shook the window-bars; they were deeply set in the stone sockets. He sounded the walls, but they returned the same sound everywhere to show that they were solid.

A crowbar might have made an impression on the door; a file on the bars; and a pickaxe on the walls; but Joel had not even the file of the prisoner Lesage.

Brave as was our hero, he felt despair, and fearing he was going mad, he let a wild, hoarse laugh escape him. But after a fit of this kind, he became gradually calm. In a month, he seemed resigned to the imprisonment. But this was due to his having conceived a plan; one of simplicity and facility of execution worthy of

his father Porthos, who might also have imagined it, though he was wont to confess to his friend D'Artagnan that his strength did not lie in his head.

“When the governor comes round for his monthly visit,” ruminated the youth, “I will have ended their plot to murder me by piecemeal by commencing to murder them wholesale. I will brain the major with this stool, seize his sword, settle his escort and the turnkey whose bunch of keys I will take in my left hand as a mace. Thus armed, I will run amuck in the jail and, albeit I do not expect to cut my way out, I will die the death of a soldier—stabbed or shot. This is not including the satisfaction of spiting the constabulary which wants to cut off my head and the king who seems to threaten me with eating his prison fare till death ensues.”

It was thinking of this resolution which restored quiet and appetite to him. He slept and ate as usual. Did he not need all his strength to run full tilt at the garrison of the Bastille?

One evening when he was feasting himself on this sweet prospect of massacre, he heard the rattle of weapons and fall of footsteps betokening the visit of the acting governor. Indeed, he made no doubt that it was something concerning himself, though at an unusual hour, and he had learned the habits of the place during his six weeks' stay. Two soldiers marched in and stationed themselves at the doorway; behind came the major, towards whom Joel stepped with his most jovial mien but holding the stool from which he had risen, in a handy though careless manner.

“How now, major,” he said, “do you come to repeat his majesty's will—that I am to be beheaded like St. John, hanged like Marigny, or sealed up in his dungeon wall like my upstairs neighbour?”

Misfortune had taught him to dissimulate, for he smiled while speaking and in his merry voice was not to be discerned the least tinge of irony or deadly deter-

mination. But he was ready to present his visitors with the stool—on the head!

"Be good enough to come this way," responded the major, "I have orders to place you in the hands of one who waits for you below."

Dumbfounded, the prisoner let the heavy piece of furniture fall to the floor.

"I will follow you," said he.

The two left the room, and between a double line of soldiers, they traversed the labyrinth of corridors and staircases, the yard, guard-rooms, drawbridge and the roofed way which our friend had met in entering. The march took place in silence, for Joel was wondering:

"Who can have come for me?" said he to himself.

At the end of the passage, a coach was waiting, guarded by four horsemen and having a police officer in a black dress by the doorway.

"Go in," he said to the prisoner, standing on one side to allow him to do so.

Joel obeyed, and the keeper jumped within beside him; the door was slammed and locked, and off started the vehicle. At the first, the pair of horses, at good speed, went through three parts of the city without the prisoner understanding whither he was being conveyed. It was one of the dark nights chosen for the transfer of prisoners. It seemed to him that he was taken out of the town through one of its gates known to him. Soon, by the purer and sharper air, he knew that he was in one of the suburbs. By peeping out of the doorway window he could see trees and fields.

"Do you wish the window let down so that you may breathe at ease?" inquired the guard. "Only, I beg the chevalier's promise that he will not try to lose his present company. I should at the same time notify the chevalier that four of my comrades, galloping behind the vehicle and armed to the teeth like me, would fire on him, and I should have to do likewise with my pistols at the least attempt to escape."

"Why does he call me chevalier," wondered the Breton. "Is there an error in the person as lawyers say? An error of this gruesome-looking officer or of Major Junca? After all," he reasoned, with a flip of the fingers, "I may as well die under one name as another. Friend," he said to the giver of this advice, "I willingly offer the pledge you seek: not on account of the pistols you and your fellows may carry; if the steers knew that they were being led to the slaughter-house there would certainly be fewer butchers in the world."

The window was let down. Need we say with what delight our youth from the country, oppressed for over a month with the thick, heavy prison atmosphere, intoxicated himself with the coolness of this summer night, full of starry gleams of floral perfumes! With what inexpressible joy, too, did he see, instead of the uniform horizon limited by four walls, the woods, villages, and landscape each side of the highway—that way tracked by the vehicle wheels at great swiftness and the hoofs of the horses going like a whirlwind.

As the journey proceeded, the prisoner questioned himself with growing wonder if he were not the dupe of a nightmare? Had he not once before travelled this road, gone through those two villages, threaded these windings of this stream, and driven through these woods? Suddenly the moon unmasked itself from behind a screen of mingled clouds, and shone on the River Seine.

The coach crossed a bridge. On the left a gigantic elm mirrored its plentiful foliage in the cold, silvered water. On the right a large house stood on stone pillars. Its roof overhung so as to cover a verandah around the second story. From this swung a wooden board, on which was painted a picture of the large tree.

"Bless my soul!" ejaculated our hero, "the bridge of Pecq, and that is the new Palace of St. Germain

beyond!" Thinking it over for a couple of minutes, he continued his unspoken thoughts. "I understand whither they are taking me—to the spot where the fault was committed—that it may be expiated there. Where I killed the musketeer, I am to be executed."

He leant himself back in the coach with a slight shiver. He had a kind of fear of seeing the spectre of the slain duellist stealing along in the moonbeams, in blood-spattered shroud.

The horses breathed hard as they climbed the hill, leading from the river-side into the town.

"Chevalier," said the man in black. "Here my instructions bid me close the windows."

Not only did he close them, but he drew dark curtains which effectually prevented all visual communications with the outside. This man, whose eyes sparkled in a dusky face, spoke with a Spanish accent.

"How is this?" muttered Joel; "where have I heard this midnight bell before? where have I seen this pair of carbuncles light up the night? where have I met this gallows-bird?"

As he was trying to collect his thoughts, the coach stopped. The "gallows-bird" partly opened the door, and invited the Breton to alight. When he did so he remarked a singular building facing him. It stood at the end of a vast courtyard, led into under an ornamental gateway and the walls coped with stone and adorned with spikes.

"The town prison, I warrant," mused the newcomer.

"Chevalier, do you mind giving me your hand?" inquired the swarthy man.

"Confound the fellow, with his 'chevalier' on all occasions. But I have no time to quarrel with him," added our friend. "I have no time to dally on this earth."

He was so resigned and prepared for everything which he thought likely to befall him, except a life in

prison, that he would have submitted without hesitation if a block, an axe and a headsman had been presented to him and a sign made that he was to kneel down. So he held out his hand with a good grace, and followed his guide without asking any question or making further observation. Thus he passed, without heeding, up a staircase into a vestibule, into a gallery and upon one of those flight of steps, broad and high, which would be so much space wasted in the eyes of our modern architects who cover eligible building lots. On one of the steps, leaning on the landing-rail of handsomely wrought iron, an old, fat man held a torch. His white hair was cut short and was shaped on the top as a priest's is shorn; and the fine broadcloth coat, covering a paunch, resembled in cut, case, trimming and colour, all austere, the garments of a proctor, a steward, a beadle or a pedagogue.

"The head warder," thought Joel. "He seems to be well fed here. On my soul, if the prisoners are nourished in this manner, they run the risk of being taken out in invalid-chairs on wheels."

"Señor Esteban," said the fat man with importance, "your duty terminates here."

The conductor released the Breton and this man went on: "Will the chevalier deign to let me precede him?"

"This ^{Wke}tub of a man is very polite," muttered the Son of Porthos. "But why does he also decorate me with the title of chevalier like everybody else?"

They reached the first landing.

"The chevalier has arrived," observed the corpulent man in an uncious and yet high-toned voice.

"This hogshead is too polite," mused Joel, shaking his head. "These are the attentions given to a man doomed to die, and I am sure it is a fatal case."

The other opened a door and begged the chevalier to walk in.

"Much too polite," sighed the Breton. "Woe is

me! It is certainly in a dungeon that I am to be taken at this dreadful hour."

The old man waved his hand for him to precede him, and the other obeyed. On crossing the threshold, he exclaimed:

"Deuce take it! where am I?"

CHAPTER XX

THE EVE OF THE EXECUTION

THERE was certainly nothing which resembled his cell in the Bastille less than the room into which he had walked. The whole aspect was changed. No more barred air-holes, cold, bare walls, scanty rickety furniture, and worn beds. All was new, bright and luxurious—mainly pastoral and amorous, for the fashion turned to Cupid and Watteau shepherds and shepherdesses. It might have been believed the boudoir of a fashionable duchess: and the new guest was fain to think that, the prison being overcrowded, they had lodged him for one night only in the rooms of the jail governor's wife. Not even in the house of the royal children had he seen so much elegance; hence he repeated his question with growing surprise.

"The chevalier is at home," rejoined the portly usher.

The young man's brow clouded like the gathering of a storm.

"At home? are you trifling with me?"

The fat old man seemed afraid of Joel's irritated eyes. He drew back a little, still facing him, as though his stomach would be a breastwork in defence, and in a voice hoarse with fear replied:

"I hasten to affirm to the chevalier that no one would mock at him. I am simply carrying out orders

received, in pursuance of which I must lock him up when I go forth."

"As I expected," responded the prisoner as naturally as could be.

"Yes, lock you in until to-morrow, when they will come to—to—well, you know better what than I do."

Our hero made the gesture of snapping a branch in two, and said: "So it is fixed for to-morrow?"

"To-morrow morning, chevalier."

"Early?"

"In time to have all over by noon—it is the usual order."

"Well!" said Joel, "I thank you, friend. I shall be ready."

"Talking of cheering up," said the other, delighted at the smooth way which the peculiar interview was making, "if the chevalier should feel any need of refreshment——"

"I see; nothing is refused to a wretch in my situation."

"I will have the honour of serving a cold collation, prepared especially, it being contrary to certain good old rules for a man to take his sleep on an empty stomach."

"Take his sleep?" repeated Joel with a wry face. It seemed to him that in coming up the stairs he had sniffed some appetizing perfumes from the kitchen. "Come to think of it, the condemned is always allowed a last good impression of the world he leaves."

The fat man hastened to roll forward a side-table on castors, on which a complete set of table articles for one person was placed in order. He added to it a golden-tinted thick soup in a Dutch porcelain bowl, an enormous meat-pie in a glazed crust, a roast-fowl cased in jelly, and a ham of such lovely rosy hue that it seemed "materialised" out of a painting by Jordaens; to say nothing of the dessert, fruit, cheese, cakes and other nice things.

"What is all this?" vociferated Joel, on beholding this knowingly devised feast, "his majesty treats his guests handsomely here. He is a prince jealous about having their last moments go off well. These succulent meats, that feather-bed in the recess, these kick-shaws——"

"Not so," protested the other, "this is only a high supper; the chevalier will be better able to appreciate our cook when he has breakfast in the morning——"

"Oh, I am to have breakfast?"

"Certainly, before the affair——"

"Of course, how could I forget that?" queried Joel with a crestfallen face.

"Is it the rule——"

"Of course, I know that nothing is refused to those that undergo the infliction of——" And he ran his hand round his neck, as he seated himself, and muttered: "It is settled, then; I shall breakfast on earth though I sup in paradise!"

The old man had placed the eatables on the table with the solemnity of a deacon setting the holy vessels on the altar: he might have been serving a mass rather than a meal. Grave, dignified and beatific, with his broad face congealed in compunction and self-concentration, he stood behind the guest, with a bottle of Chambertin in his hand, in the attitude of the choir-boy holding the chalice, and he complacently listened to the gentleman, who, after finishing the soup to the last drop, proceeded to dismantle the patty.

"It will be a splendid sight—people are fighting for the best places—the chapel is so small."

Oh, they were going to take the culprit into the chapel; probably for the Amende Honorable, or religious ceremony in which the condemned apologised for his misdeed.

"Father Lachaise is going to speak the exhortation——"

"The royal confessor! The king is doing the grand for me."

"Naturally, as he will be present."

"The king is coming to see me turned off?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Yes; I understand. It is very kind of his majesty and much honour for me."

"And he brings the queen, and she, all the ladies. All the court will be there."

"The queen, too, in at the death! a singular sight for her and the ladies. Verily, your court has lofty tastes! they will be delighted when I lose my head."

He rose and threw down his napkin. After all, the queen was Spanish, and at her father's court, the court ladies witnessed the burning of heretics. It was necessary that he should show a bold front to this choice assembly, and to do that he ought to have a rest. He had made away with the victuals which had loaded the board, like a juggler causing the pea to vanish under the thimbles, and now he meant to see if the bed equalled the cheer in goodness.

"Does the chevalier wish me still to attend him?"

"No. You may retire. Good-night!"

"The chevalier will please to bear in mind that I am compelled to carry away the room door-key. Please not to think it is through any personal freak, but because my master ordered so."

"Take it away, my friend: for happiness there is no place like a lock-up."

"There is a bell on the night-table, and if the chevalier requires anything, he has but to ring, there will be some one on the watch in the corridor."

"I expected a sentry would be posted there."

"I wish a good-night to the chevalier," said the old man, bowing deeply: "in the morning, my master, the Duke of Almada, will visit him."

"Oh, the duke is the governor, is he? I never heard his name mentioned before," thought our

prisoner, as he was undressing in the solitude. "And I never came across such a novel character as his turn-key. Where did I meet him before—this buckbasket of fat, this full-moon face of purple, and this carriage of a sacred elephant?"

Still in a maze, he laid down, and fell off into a delicious sleep, whether it came from the excellent repast, the generous wine, the softness of the fine bed-linen, or the fatigue from the romance which he was acting lately: the graceful figures in the pastoral landscapes of the tapestry mingled with his dreams and danced in a round of poetical, fabulous and impossible charm.

Having an iron will, our hero could command his body as readily as his mind and heart. Having decided on taking rest, he slept on without break until the hour when a footman glided noiselessly into the room, and by drawing the curtains, let a flood of sunshine cover the bed with a sheet of gold.

We must acknowledge that on waking and recollecting where he was and what impended, Joel heaved half a dozen sighs of which the wind would have knocked down a bull-calf. Persuaded that he was doomed to death, and that the sentence would be carried out without delay, he had resolved to bear himself handsomely. Not to unnerve himself, he gave up the idea of suing to see Aurore. An interview with her would have robbed him of courage. It was on paper that he would bid farewell to Mdlle. du Tremblay, at the same time that he would entrust her with the deposit for the prisoner's daughter.

By the light, Joel judged that day was well advanced. As they would soon be coming for him, he rose with speed. But as his hand was put forth to find his clothes, left off by the bedside, he was surprised that they were gone.

At this moment, the stout jailer, as he still took him

to be, entered to ask: "Has the chevalier had the repose that meets his desire?—"

"Yes. But where are my clothes?"

"Consequently he entreats the chevalier to replace his Breton costume by this suit from the first tailor's of Paris."

He waved his hand, and four footmen brought in an elegant court dress in flesh-coloured velvet, with lace trimmings, and complete from the puffed shoes starred with diamonds to the pearl-grey felt hat bending down in the flap with the weight of a magnificent flame-tinted plume.

"This," continued the old man, pointing to an imposing servant following the other four, "this is Master Hardouin, my lord's head valet, who is charged, after the bath, to array the chevalier and assist him in the dressing."

"Fools!" thought Joel. "What a lot of ribbons for the lamb led to the slaughter! I should have marched as well in my own clothes, without fuss and feathers, pompons and lace. Nevertheless, tell your master that I thank him for thinking of me, and that I shall conform to his intentions."

At bottom, our Breton was not sorry to don for once in his life all the frippery of the fashionable whom he had admired with the like on their shoulders. He felt a secret delight in appearing before his judges and proceeding to the execution adorned by all the splendour of a display unknown to him so far. Now he felt sure that he should look well in the executioner's eyes. His bravery would be doubled by the lustre of his costume. So he delivered himself into Hardouin's hands.

Imprisonment had made no impression on him. His sunburnt complexion may have been paled a little, and his herculean figure a trifle reduced, but this gave him a delicacy of appearance vainly sought in him before. Strong and handsome he had gone into the Bastille,

and he came forth with strength and manly beauty, with the fitness which is the mark of good blood. In short, here stood a perfect cavalier, as he looked at himself in a mirror and acknowledged that he had reason to be proud.

Ah, if Aurore could but see him now!

He took up the hat.

"It is well. I am ready. Lead on."

He went forth with the old stout man.

"How is this?" demanded Joel, in the passage, "nobody to escort me?—no guards?"

"We have only the landing to cross and the stairs," replied the steward.

"Oh, it is here the court assembles?"

He made a wry face, for he was wishful to walk through the town, and exhibit to the gaping mob the stylish garments, the rich lace and the bold sweep of the plume. The good, vain Porthos perpetually reappeared in his son.

"Deuce take them!" he muttered, "I hope, whenever the trial takes place, they will not execute me *in camera*!"

The steward opened a door, saying:

"The Chevalier de Locmaria!"

"Let the dear boy enter," rejoined a paternal voice.

Joel uttered an exclamation of surprise: instead of the stern and impressive show and paraphernalia of justice which he had expected to behold in the room where he was introduced, the Saviour on the cross hung against dark drapery, and the long table where the judges would be sitting in a row, cold and solemn in black and scarlet robes, the ushers in inky garb and golden chains, the clerks with long pens, the guards with ebony wands: here was a large dining-room, where the sun sparkled on Bohemian glass and shone on the magnificent silver plate, arrayed on shelves of an oaken sideboard with a table laid for

two, aglow with rare flowers and dazzling with bleached linen, crystal and china.

Near this board an old gentleman was buried in an arm-chair, upholstered in Cordovan leather, studded with gilt nails and stamped with arabesques. This old gentleman got up as Joel entered, and was at once recognised by the latter.

"The Chevalier d'Herblay," he broke forth with astonishment.

"Yes," responded the other, running to him with open arms. "And better, besides, if you are agreeable. For, though I kept the mask on during my journey from Nantes to Paris, here at St. Germain there is no need for me to disavow that I am the Duke of Almada, the ambassador of his Majesty the King of Spain."

"Duke of Almada—Spanish Ambassador?" repeated the youth, pressing his forehead between his hands with a stupefied air, "my ideas are buzzing about in my head like fledglings in a nest. However," he went on, putting out his hand to buttonhole the other as if he feared that he would escape from him, "since I do not recover, your lordship, will you assure me that I am in my senses, not dreaming while awake, and if not the dupe of a dream, the actor in no fairy tale or detestable trickery?"

"My young friend," returned the duke cordially, "I will explain what is to give you pleasure. I think with you that an explanation is necessary between us; but I should like to unfold it while we are taking breakfast, for we have a great deal to get through with this morning, and we must lose no time."

Motioning the guest to be seated, he ordered his steward to serve.

"We can speak freely," he added, as he unfolded his napkin, "as my footman understands only Spanish."

Joel seated himself mechanically facing his host, who filled his glass and his plate with his own hand.

"If you do not object to speaking while eating, my boon companion, I am at your orders."

"Where am I, my lord?" began the Breton, without waiting to be asked again.

"You are in my house, or I should say, a friend's, as a resident of St. Germain allows me to occupy his dwelling when business calls me hither: it is the gentleman whom you saw with me at the inn at Saumur."

"Then I am not in prison?"

"You are in Boislaurier House, near the church, and opposite the palace."

"But I have been in prison, in the Bastille, these six weeks."

"Oh, yes: from having delivered a sword-thrust. Ah, you are a *matador*, a fatal fighter, as the Spanish say, my champion of Belle-Isle."

"But I was yesterday in the Bassinière Tower of the Bastille."

"Very true, it was only yesterday that his majesty signed the order for your release."

"His majesty signed the order?" repeated the Son of Porthos, starting up on his chair.

"He restores you to the world and gives you entire freedom."

"So that I am free?"

"Yes."

"And I am not to be tried?"

"No."

"And of course not sentenced to——"

He made a gesture of cutting his throat with a drawing movement of the edge of his open hand.

"You are all right," returned the old nobleman, laughing. "Your head will remain tranquil on its shoulders, which it would be a pity to remove as it looks very well there. Now, may I offer you some of

this wormed-up partridge with a glass of wine, it will help you to swallow the good news."

"With a good heart—let us drink the health of the king. And yours, too, my lord, since you come to me as the dove to the Ark. But," after he had tossed off a brimming goblet, "to whom do I owe this unlooked for boon? who has begged it of the king?"

"You have friends at court, my young master."

"Do you tell me so? All the friends I know of are a couple whose acquaintance I formed at a Paris inn, the 'Blackamoor Trumpeter,' of which one is its host Bonlarron, and the other a fellow-guest, one Friquet, neither of whom do I imagine powerful enough to extract a favour from the king."

Almada shook his finger at him with playful threatening.

"My son of Brittany, you are ungrateful, and blink, for you look afar for what is close to you."

"You are right," returned the youth, smiting his brow with his fist. "I am a fool, a blockhead, a heartless scamp, not to have guessed sooner; it is you who have done all this—you are my liberator."

"Say rather that it is Providence," interrupted the other, with his mouth full; "although I find a pleasure in extricating honest folks from straits when they interest me. By the way, will you have another helping of this larded leveret?"

The Breton held out his plate.

"I am ready for anything," he said. "And I certainly shall not be vexed at you if you give me a fit of indigestion, when you have saved me from the courts of justice. But," he quickly subjoined as a fresh idea struck him and caused him to lay down his fork and lean on the table with both elbows to have a good stare at his host, "how did you learn that I had a duel with that musketeer, was arrested and clapped into the Bastille?"

"We will tell you some day," said Aramis, chafing

his chin with his hand. "For the present we have other fish to fry. By the way, how did you like those smoked eels last night? they come all the way from my fishing village by Barcelona, and are appreciated by epicures. You can thank me another time; when we both have leisure, you to be lavish of gratitude and to receive its expression."

Joel stood up, his breast heaving with emotion.

"At all times, you may reckon on my life, my blood, my good arm!"

"Wait a minute, boy," interposed the duke, with good humour, "are you sure that all these belong to you? Did you not give them to the woman you love?"

Joel started, for these words reminded him of Aurore. He was free to hasten to the Grey House and learn what had become of her, and explain why he had been so long absent. All the ideas which had been gathering in his brain disappeared before this one. All he thought of was hurrying from the table. Nothing was capable of paralysing his impulse—not even the cardoons in marrow, or the fat young turkey which were now put on the board.

"My lord," he said, "you have treated me kindly, like a father—but I must beg a further favour——"

"You have but to name it, my young friend."

"I only want leave to depart on business which will not wait."

"Leave before we finish breakfast?"

"I am no longer hungry or thirsty."

"What a mad-brain you are, that you forget the ceremony which is fixed for noon."

"What ceremony?"

"That for which I sent my man Esteban to bring you out of the Bastille: for which you have been conducted here: for which the royal chapel has been ornamented, the royal notary called, and letters of invitation issued to the whole court: for which, in

short, you have been dressed in a wedding-suit which gives you the appearance of a Galaor or a Don Sancho—that which the king and queen deign to honour with their presence.”

“Is my dream continuing—am I in a fever?” moaned our hero, at the apex of amazement. “For mercy’s sake, my lord, answer me. What ceremony is on the board?”

Looking fixedly at him, the duke replied: “For what ceremony would you don a wedding-suit, if not for your own wedding?”

When the thunderbolt falls on a man’s head, he does not burst out into shrieks and howls: he is deprived of consciousness, motion, and thought. But under the apparent apathy, nature is still acting: the briefly interrupted senses and organs re-establish themselves and when intelligence of the disaster returns, the wretch moves, groans, and strives to be himself once more. So it was with Joel, who was for a while thunder-stricken, but at last an exclamation rose from his lips:

“But I have no wish to be married.”

“You are but a child—the king’s will must never be disputed.”

“Is it the king who wants me to marry?”

“It is his wish, and as a respectful subject, you——”

“Why does the king meddle with my private affairs?” cried the Son of Porthos. “He does not know me—he has never seen me.”

“Chevalier, the king knows all noblemen.”

“And, granting that to be the case, why should there be a marriage?” said Joel; with a shrug of the shoulders which rather reflected on his claim to be numbered among the king’s acquaintances.

“Simply because all ladies of the palace establishment are bound to be married.”

“Oh, so it is a lady of the royal establishment that I am to be married to—like taking a pig in a poke. I am sorry for her, but may all the wedding-rings in

Take, make well - Ant

the world be welded into one suit of chains in which to hang me, but if she waits for me to wed her, she will pine in perpetuity! The king is mighty, they say. Let him be the master over his courtiers and his varlets," continued the youth, striding up and down, the dining-room becoming too confined for him; "let him set the law for all Europe; let him turn the globe into a bubble to obey his breath; all this is a matter between him and human weakness, servility and foolishness. But he shall not dispose of my will and feelings, my free choice—this came from God to me, and not to him by birth or with the crown. I am a Breton, and the men of my land are more or less like their ancestor Duke Conan the Headstrong."

"Have a care, young man!" retorted the duke, concealing his merriment, "you confess that the Bastille is a disagreeable dwelling——"

"In other words, I am to be dragged back into it, unless I yield to the royal will? The bridal chamber or the prison. I prefer the latter: for if my body suffers, my conscience will be at ease."

"His majesty can do more——"

"Yes, I know he can have my head struck off. It may be imagined that I shall flinch; but do not make any mistake. I was ready yesterday, and shall not quail to-day or hereafter. Does the king want a sample of my courage? Let him come and see me die."

While thus speaking Joel was a sight to behold. The richness of his attire, its laces and ribbons, went for nothing in the effect, no more than did his athletic beauty: the beauty was in the nobility on his brow, and in his look and his smile.

"He has spoken like a man," mused Aramis. "He is one on whose shoulders a musketeer's uniform will fit as though he inherited it as a son of the regiment. It is a pity to throw him away to the enemy, but he must not remain here—he would break the king in twain like a dry twig."

There was a moment's silence which the ex-prelate broke with the words:

"Come, come, my lad of mettle, this is all very fine, but we are not in Syracuse just now and reigned over by a tyrant. The king will not violate your personal rights in any way."

"Forgive me," said Joel, becoming calm. "I was wrong to lose my temper, and forget what I owe you and the goodness of the king. But I am not accustomed to disguise what I feel. And besides, did you know that I——"

"If you only knew," interrupted the ambassador, "what a blessing was intended for you!"

"I do not want to know anything about it; for I should have to decline her even if with regret were she endowed with all human perfections. You, who are a nobeman, will understand me from all sworn pledges being a holy thing; I am engaged to another. A man does not twice give his heart. I am not my own master, for my heart and my life are in a woman's keeping—one who is also an adorable creature, and without offence to the lady you cite, the best and most charming of her sex."

"But if the one of whom I spoke brings you a marriage portion larger than the spotless soul in its ideal envelope? If to you, a poor and unknown youth, uncertain of the future, and yet open to legitimate and elevated ambition, she brings glory and fortune—the sovereign's friendship, a position at court and a superior grade in the army——"

"Heaven will bear me witness," said Joel, with a flashing eye, "that I often dreamed of the joy of marching among the soldiers of France if not the honour of commanding them as we went into the smoke of battle to seek in the hostile ranks my captain's commission or my knightly spurs, but, though your witch should furnish me with the means of realising the conception, I should still refuse."

Aramis rested his elbow on the cloth and his chin in his hand, as he spoke with emphasis on each syllable and scanned the young man with piercing eyes:

"Even though the fair one be named Aurore du Tremblay?"

The hearer was confused with the joy which rushed to his brain. His veins swelled and beat. The floor swam beneath him, and had he not caught at the table he would have fallen.

"What, is the bride to be——"

"It is Mdlle. du Tremblay who is offered to you for your life-companion—would you refuse her?"

"She—oh, heaven help me!"

"Do you love her as she deserves being loved?"

"Do I love her?" He pronounced this with fervour in which blazed the most ardent passion that ever fired a soul. "Oh, my dear sir," he faltered, "if all this be not sporting with me, I shall die of bliss. But it would be too cruel to play with me—better kill me at once with a bullet in my brain or a sword-thrust through my body."

Almada rose and going to one of the windows, he raised the curtain.

"Look," he said.

Boislaurier House faced the front of the palace. On the open space between there was always a crowd in any season including people who came from town to see the king and court; the populace like the display of the great more than some believe. On this morning, the curious pressed in greater numbers than commonly over the pointed paving stones between the church and the palace. Before the latter, guarded by the musketeers and the Swiss Guards, the handsomest coaches set down gentlemen in brilliant attire and ladies in the latest freaks of fashion. Rumour ran that they came to attend a marriage at midday in the Chapel Royal before the king and queen.

All at once a murmur ran through the crowd:

"The bride, the bride! make way—this is the bride!"

A carriage in the royal colours came out of a street, in which was seated Mdlle. du Tremblay in company with the head-mistress of the queen's ladies and another lady of the bed-chamber, with a gentleman, the master of ceremonies, Marquis Montglat. When the crowd beheld her, in her white satin costume, the long white veil floating down her shoulders, and the symbolical orange-blossoms in her hair, there arose loud shouts amid the clapping of hands: "How lovely she is!"

She was beautiful, indeed, if only for the expression of unlimited felicity to be read on her ravishing features.

Reeling like a drunken man, Joel sank upon a seat.

"Do I still dream?" he asked himself. "Will I never awake? Or am I going mad?"

The Duke of Almada slapped him on the shoulder, saying:

"Well, descendant of the Headstrong Conan, are you still determined to die a bachelor?"

"Who says that we love one another?" questioned the Son of Porthos, instead of replying.

"Who would have said so, but the lady herself."

"And does she consent to marry me?" again interrogated the youth, whose voice slightly trembled.

"Do you think they are forcing her to the altar?"

"But how has she come to marry me, without a name?" went on the other with distrust.

"Pardon me," said the old noble; "you have a name and a title; you are henceforth the Chevalier de Locmaria, according to the king's good pleasure."

"But I have done nothing to deserve this!"

"Think of that hereafter. I have answered to the king for your zeal to serve him. The war is not over—a decisive campaign is preparing on the Rhine, and there you may win your spurs."

"I vow to heaven," exclaimed Joel, "that his

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majesty will not have a soldier in his ranks more devoted to the glory of his flag. Give me an opportunity to show what I can do, and, as our old Armorican song has it, I will prove that danger and I are two lions born at the same hour but I am the elder and the master."

His unusual stature expanded to its full development; a breath of warlike enthusiasm seemed to throw up the mass of his hair; his countenance beamed with flame as from the cannon mouth, and his tones rang as from the bugle sounding the charge.

"I will not fail to remember your words," said the old duke gravely: "though I am sure that I need not remind a gentleman of the sanctity of an oath. His Majesty," he went on in a less solemn tone, "had wrongs to repair towards the family of Mdlle. du Tremblay, so that nothing should come as a surprise to you in his bestowing on the dear child the husband of whom she dreamed. And there is nothing particularly astonishing in that husband being provided by the royal initiative with the means to hold a proper position at court."

As though to efface from the hearer's mind the very shadow of mistrust, he concluded affectionately: "Besides, I do not allow you to imagine scruples where Aurore, the paragon of virtue and honour, has not deemed it proper to raise any obstacles?"

M. de Boislaurier entering at this juncture, the diplomatist presented him to his guest as "One of my excellent friends who is anxious to become yours likewise."

They shook hands warmly.

"My lord Duke," said the new arrival, "allow me to remind you that the king is waiting."

"That is true. And I forget all about him while chatting. Let us be off, chevalier. Quick, Bazin, our hats, gloves and swords. Make the king wait!" he added with comic fright. "The Lord forbid! offenders

have been put in the Bastille for milder faults than that. And it is not only the king that is kept waiting but the Queen of Beauty. That is a crime to womanhood a thousand times more wicked than treason."

CHAPTER XXI

A SPECIES OF ROYAL DIVORCE

THE wedding was performed with great pomp, and the happy pair were taken in a royal carriage to Boislaurier House, where Aramis's friend had placed the first floor at their disposal.

Aurore and Joel arrived there, bewildered by the day so overcrowded with divers adventures through which they were driven blindfold, it might be said. Judge if they were in haste to relate to each other what they had done and experienced since they last met, and try to understand the events of which they suffered the results without knowing the reasons.

Unfortunately, Lady Montausier accompanied the new lady of the royal household in order to initiate her in her new duties.

"To-morrow your service will commence," she said; "it is urgent that you should be early at the palace whence you cannot go away unless by written leave."

"What do you say?" broke in the newly married man, "forbidden to leave the royal residence?"

"Certainly: the queen may be seriously attacked and require help at any moment."

"It seems to me that it would be better to keep a doctor and sick-nurse at hand on regular wages," grumbled our hero. "How long is this service to last?"

"Three months from now; still you ought not to go far away from the court, as some attendant may fall

ill, and you ought to be ready to replace her, if you keep in favour."

"You seem to be very frightened about illness," said Joel in an audible whisper. "Listen, my good dame. If she must begin her duties early to-morrow, you will understand that she and I have a lot of private matters to discuss. So you will overlook my apparent rudeness in suggesting that your presence will probably be more in request over the way than in this house."

Mdme. de Montausier went off in high dudgeon, as became an old lady of sixty, and left the pair at length alone. But, however bold in dismissing the queen's first lady, our hero was timid and embarrassed when beside Aurore and scarcely dared to speak.

"What delight do I feel under your protection," said she.

"Since I was a child at my mother's knee," returned Joel, "When I was happy without knowing it, I do not recall in all my life one moment like this!"

For a time, they remained mute, absorbed in reciprocal contemplation.

"You are fair as an angel, Aurore," said the man at last.

"And you appear to me as the archangel with the flaming sword, from my having seen you twice guarding me with your arm," she rejoined.

The windows were open: the night was calm, the air pure and the sky splendid. Only vague murmurs crossed at intervals the silence of the slumberous night. The wind wafted scents either sharp or heavy as they came from the forest of the garden. They were sitting side by side, as they sat on the bench on the Celestins wharf when the ruffians of Colonel Cordbuff assaulted them. The memory of that attack struck her and she shuddered.

"What is the matter, darling?" inquired Joel. "Here we have not to dread the storm of treachery. Let our spirits rest in hope."

"Yes," responded Aurore, "let us forget the past. We should enjoy this gladsome hour without fear."

With a gentle movement she let her head sink upon his shoulder, while her eyelids drooped, but the Breton started up as her lips almost were reached by his own.

"What is the matter?" asked the wife, reopening her astonished eyes.

At this moment a spurred heel rang again on the pavement of the square, and a vigorous blow was struck on the doorpanel. A powerful voice was heard to shout: "On the king's service!" before which no one had the right to keep his door bolted, locked or barred.

Aurore recoiled.

"What can that be?" she faltered.

"No doubt, it is some message from the king for M. de Boislaurier, or the Duke of Almada," replied Joel, though he was not at ease.

They remained apart, staring at each other, while two or three minutes passed. At length they heard the slow step of the steward approaching. A hand gently tapped on the door.

"Who is there?" inquired the Knight of Locmaria.

"A message from the king," replied Bazin, to whom the gentleman opened the door for him to enter.

"Lieutenant Maupertius of the royal musketeers," he answered.

In the shadow on the landing appeared the manly form of the guardsman, partly draped in his cloak; behind him were Aramis's emotionless face and the more inquiring one of Boislaurier. On the threshold the soldier saluted the lady profoundly: then advancing towards our hero, he presented a large note with the royal seal and said: "On behalf of the king."

Joel broke the seal, opened the envelope and drew forth a parchment which he ran his eyes over: then he uttered an outcry: "An appointment as ensign in the new artillery company forming at Douai." He

turned towards Aurore with his countenance beaming with pride and delight, to say: "Think of that! an officership—I am an officer! Oh, our kind—our excellent king!"

Maupertius took another note from his pocket, and handed this also to the speaker, saying: "By order of the king!"

The latter treated this as he had done the other, but the exclamation it drew from him was not pleasure like the first. He read the king's orders over again with astonishment. He examined each line and weighed every word by itself. He had turned whiter than the paper held in his shaking hand.

"What is it?" asked his wife.

By way of answer the Knight of Locmaria read aloud:

On receiving this order, the Chevalier de Locmaria will mount horse and ride at full speed to report himself at Paris to the Minister of War, who will hand him despatches for Marshal Créquy, now in his camp before Freiburg, in Brisgau. Under no pretext whatsoever is there to be delay in the execution of this order. Our lieutenant of the musketeers, M. de Maupertius, is charged to see that the Chevalier de Locmaria is despatched upon his journey.

(Signed) LOUIS.

The newly wedded couple stared at one another in astonishment.

"But the Lord forbid that this should be possible," uttered Joel.

"What should not be possible?" haughtily demanded the musketeer, remembering that he stood before the duellist who had made a vacancy in his corps.

"What his majesty requests."

"His majesty does not request—he commands,"

replied the successor of D'Artagnan with the same stiffness.

"But his majesty cannot think—he must have forgotten—The devil take me! I cannot leave the woman whom I married only this morning!"

The piteous accent and the despairing mien of the poor fellow touched even the officer, who said:

"I appreciate all there is painful in what is commanded you; but you are a soldier, sir, and must obey orders."

"Still, take me to the king!" implored the young gentleman; "I must speak to him, explain to him—he will listen to my prayers and grant a delay."

"The king has retired for the night, and nobody is allowed to see him until his hour of rising. At that hour, you ought to be on the road to Freiburg."

"But would you have me take up the march in this dress?" remonstrated Joel, glancing at his wedding garments.

Almada came forward to say: "My dear chevalier, in your dressing room is a complete outfit for a chevalier, besides, there is the sword which you handed to the constables and which was restored by them, an attention which is unusual in those gentry and a surprise which I reserved to you."

"And you can have the pick of my horses in the stable," added Boislaurier.

"Alas!" said the ambassador, taking the husband's hand, "You see me afflicted. Pardon an old man who is the cause of all this. Not suspecting that it would be so soon brought to the test, it was I who had the unlucky idea of boasting to the king of the ardent zeal with which you desired to serve him. I must have been too eloquent in picturing how impatient you are to prove your gallantry. I was wrong to repeat these words you uttered on your wedding morn."

"Oh, then, the chevalier has made an engagement," inquired the young wife.

"To sacrifice everything to his king and country," replied the diplomatist. The chevalier hung his head while the old plotter continued: "Consequently the king, wanting a messenger whom he could trust, fixed on our friend, from my language, to favour him with this token of esteem."

The Breton looked up at him in supplication. But he went on, after a pause, "His majesty cannot have calculated what such a separation would cost you at such a moment, although it is but temporary; and if it were allowed me to make my voice heard, I am certain that he would revoke his decision. Unfortunately, we have no time to lose."

"Give me some advice," uttered Joel.

"My dear boy," said the old noble, shaking his white head, "a man of heart and wits like yourself should at such times take counsel of himself."

"To make a long story short," interpolated the lieutenant, "what am I to report to his majesty?"

"You will announce to him," Aurore took it upon herself to reply, "that his orders shall be obeyed. Do you believe, Joel," she continued while her husband looked at her in astonishment, "that I love so little and take so little pride in you that I would try to detain you? Honour orders and we must needs obey. This new parting will cost me many a pang, and heaven alone will know how sad and lonesome I shall feel in your absence in this court where I shall be left. But you offered your service to the king, and it is not right that you should draw back when he requires you. Go and get ready, therefore, without weakness or hesitation. The thought that we are both doing our duty, you, on the journey, I, in my solitude, will console us."

In less than an hour, the actors in this domestic drama came down into the yard of the Boislaurier House where a groom was holding a pair of horses by the bridle. The wedding couple were arm-in-arm:

the woman's eyes were dry and her visage calm, for she wept inwardly in order that she should not shake her husband's courage. He appeared no less resigned. He looked handsome in his military harness: a breast-plate and buff gauntlets, a steel gorget, a blue coat laced with silver at every seam, scarlet breeches, high boots and a hat with a red plume. The sword of Porthos was again in its place at his side.

"Chevalier, I have selected my best war-horse," observed M. de Boislaurier.

"And as you will want an attendant," added Almada, "I give you Esteban, one of my faithful Spaniards, who, however, speaks French as well as any Parisian citizen. He is a brave, skilful fellow who can help you in an emergency."

Joel bowed his thanks.

"If you please," said Maupertius, "I will accompany you to the city boundary, to give you instructions."

Joel leaped into the saddle: the two married ones regarding each other with deep melancholy but with supreme serenity of heart.

"You are not going alone," breathed the young woman, "for you take my soul with you."

"Aurore, you are great and good," whispered he, as she held out her hand as if to point out his road.

"God will bring you home safe to me! We shall meet again! Remember that you will find me what you left me—your wife, proud to wear your name, and happy that we love one another."

The Son of Porthos leaned over and, catching her round the waist, he lifted her upon his saddlebow without an effort.

"Yes, we shall meet again," he repeated: "God shield you, my adored one, till then;" and the last syllable of the wish died away on their lips uniting in a kiss.

True to his instructions, Joel rode straight to the

offices of the War Minister, but Louvoise, who had been kept late at St. Germain's overnight, would not receive any one until noon. Thinking of the Widow Scarron, the Knight of Locmaria, heedless of a kind of remonstrance from Esteban, remounted and proceeded direct to the Grey House.

The lady welcomed him, though her surprise was great to see him in his attire.

"I am the king's soldier," he said, explaining what had occurred to him. "I come to say good-bye to you, our good angel, our providence, and thank you for all you have done on our behalf. You must have had a hand in the good fortune showered on us, for I presume that it was due to you that my wife obtained a footing in the court."

"Let me see: you are the Chevalier de Locmaria and you have married Mdlle. du Tremblay?"

"You know all this—but with what an odd look you stare at me! any one would think that you were not anxious for my happiness. It is true that there are crosses with it," he went on, shaking his head. "We had barely time to exchange half a dozen words before an order from the king dropped on us, and here I am, obliged to ride off in the first peep of the honeymoon."

"Sit down there, M. Joel," said the Widow Scarron, pointing to a seat, "and tell me the whole particulars. The sympathy you inspire in me makes me curious to know everything concerning this event which I so little anticipated."

When he had again but more fully related the story, the lady, who had listened attentively, muttered to herself: "He is speaking in good faith. Does your wife love you?" she inquired abruptly.

The Breton burst into a peal of hearty laughter.

"That is a good joke," he replied, "certainly not more than I love her. To doubt her love would be to offend the most virtuous heart in the world. But I am

at a loss to understand—" he said, with surprise in which anxiety began to show.

"Have you any reason to distrust this Duke of Almada, the prime mover in this match-making?" she interrupted.

"Why should I distrust a good old man like him? He is the best and most generous of men."

"Then you do not suspect him of any wish to deceive you?"

"To what end—by what means—under the sway of what interest?"

"Has Mdlle. du Tremblay ever spoken to you about the king?" proceeded Widow Scarron, after a silence.

"I mean in any peculiar way?"

"Never! what a strange question! why do you put it to me thus?" His voice was choked as by some sudden pain: not that he suffered any, but he feared he should through the action of misfortune. The lady scrutinised him attentively, muttering to herself.

"Such a clear eye, honest features, frank speech, and this real and sincere grief are not the traits of husbands who traffic in their wives' honour. He may be a victim, but not a guilty accomplice. My friend," she said to the chevalier, "you do wrong to feel alarmed. I do not really know what could have been in my head to bother you thus with my silly questions. Forget them and pardon me. There are times when the blue devils dance in one's brain and speak by one's mouth."

The Breton was yet young, as prompt to cool as to heat. He sighed heavily in relief at these final words.

"Good again!" he exclaimed in serenity. "You frightened me, though, for I was going crazy, I believe. To think that I was on the point of suspecting the most perfect of human creatures!"

"Well, to punish yourself for that wicked thought," returned the royal governess affectionately, "you must still more dearly love her who is so worthy of your

passion, consecrate the whole of your life to her and watch over her happiness as a miser does his treasure. Go away in confidence," she added, holding out her hand. "Go quickly, too, that you may the sooner return."

"That was my determination," said our hero, rising. "I am in haste to get through with a disagreeable piece of business before I quit Paris with all speed. But promise me one thing before I leave you: in my absence, watch over my darling."

"I will do better than watch over her—I will keep by her and confer with her about you."

"You must yourself see that you are an angel!"

"If any peril threatens her whom I call your treasure, I will warn you of the plot so that you, whose duty it is, shall defend her."

CHAPTER XXII

THE BLACK COSTUME

AFTER leaving the widow's, Joel proceeded to the Rue Bouloi, to use up the hour before him until Louvois should receive him, and to acquit himself of the mission Pierre Lesage had entrusted to him.

The first person he met had pointed out the right street, and he soon found the house, where the ladies of the court had gone to consult the oracle. By day the whole scene was so different that Joel did not exactly recognise that here he had defended M^{de} Montespan, and hurled the confederate of the Manicarde into the gutter.

Even in broad daylight, the dwelling had not a less mysterious appearance. But the fittings of the room had been removed, and where she had performed her wizardry nothing was left but an old table, not worth

burning, at which was seated an old hag and a man was standing. He had brought in a pot of wine and two pewter goblets were there to receive its contents; they had been playing cards and the winner had brought the liquor now at hand.

The man was the Walton mentioned in the case of the Poisoners and he was ruddy, red in hair as a fox, with large teeth under a bristling moustache; his pale blue eyes seemed of glass—so cold and unfeeling. The world had acted like Joel of late—that is, kicked him into the gutter and kept him there, for he was unkempt, dirty and tattered.

They were just commencing to drink when they heard the steps of Joel, who had found the door ajar after the man's entrance and boldy intruded.

"Who has the cheek to come in here like this?" demanded the man, feeling for the sword which no doubt had been sold for old iron.

"It is some soldier," replied the woman, "for I hear the scratching of the sword-scabbard along the wall."

"This looks queer," muttered the other, "though I hoped the matter had blown over, especially since Therese ran away. She may have been taken and told of us, eh? However, they can get no proof against us. I have destroyed what existed when I was caged, and then they could not hold me."

The sound of steps approached, and a lusty voice began to shout in the deserted corridor: "House, ho! is there nobody at home? let me see some Christian soul who will supply a brother in a fog with enlightenment?"

"This is strange," muttered Walton. "Yet it may be a spy of the police come to extract some clue with regard to Therese. The Lord only knows what she may have dealt in without my knowledge since I was knocked on the head by that cowardly giant." He leaned towards the hag, saying: "Mind what you

say; I am the public-writer Latour, from the corner: you are the sick-nurse Bosse, and we have just moved in and know no more than Adam and Eve who were the previous occupants."

With a manipulation of the hands he executed some changes in the arrangement of his hair and moustache, and awaited the new-comer.

The old woman rose and as she went to the door, she screamed:

"Do not make such a noise there, you! I am here."

She opened the door without hastening so as to give her companion time to finish the alteration in his appearance.

Joel strode in without a pause.

"Good people, excuse this riot, but I have not a moment to lose. And your dark corridor is so difficult to traverse."

Walton stared at him with hate and rage, for he recognised the tall man who had not only refused him assistance to nab the three ladies, but had felled him to the mire. On the other hand, the new soldier of the king did not give more than a glance to the scamp who presented nothing to interest him.

"Captain," said the two together, "we are at your service."

"I only want a little information: two words about a girl or woman named Lesage—Therese Lesage."

The man's face expressed surprise not to be concealed though he was an adept at self-control: but he turned to the woman, and said "Therese Lesage? do you know any one of that name, Mother Bosse?"

"We have only just moved in," was the hag's reply, "and I do not know any of the neighbours or who was living here before we came."

"You do not know who lived here?"

"We do not want to know them: they were a bad lot, who told fortunes and who sold drugs, and the

police routed them out. I never heard that name before, eh, Latour?"

"Is there no one else who has been here all along? it seems a large house," persisted the inquirer.

"I occupy the whole house," returned the woman, "but am going to let part of it."

Joel looked nonplussed.

"I already knew that this person whom I have never seen," he said, "may have strong reasons to keep concealed; but I do not wish her any harm. I do not come from any enemy of hers, but from her father, who died a short time ago, in the Bastille, almost under my eyes."

At the news of the death of Lesage, the pretended Englishman's glassy eyes flashed with a serpent's glitter, but Joel did not notice it as he pursued:

"The unfortunate man charged me to hand to her an article which is of some value, I was given to understand—a locket in brass or gilt——"

At these words, the fire of greed blazed up in the old woman's eyes, and she was about to speak, but with a terrifying glance the man stopped her.

"This medallion," said Joel, "contains a paper said to be of great importance to this Lesage girl—something like a weapon of defence, if I clearly understood it. It is therefore urgent that I should find her, for the purpose of handing it to her."

"Captain," replied the man in a shaky voice, "I wish I could help you in the matter, but it is no use my cudgelling my brains, I cannot furnish you with the slightest clue. But if she were one of the infernal crew who held witches' sabbaths in this house, I suggest that you should apply to the police. The house of their chief, M. de Lareynie, is only a few doors off."

"This honest fellow is quite right," thought the inquirer. "And Huguenin the jailer hit the nail on the head. She will have left Paris, and perhaps the country. This couple seem truthful, although they

are not prepossessing, and the man's visage is a picture of rascality. Ought I to question the neighbours? no, for I have no time, since it is getting on for midday, and Minister Louvois will expect me. After calling on him, I must take the road. When I return from Freiburg I will resume this errand, which weighs upon me, with more activity. And if I cannot reach the intended depository of this locket, Faith! I shall destroy it, paper and all."

To the joy of the couple, he proceeded towards the street. As he was crossing the threshold he almost ran against a woman who was on the point of entering. She was dressed in black velvet, which was covered with a large silk mantle of the same colour. The gentleman stood aside to allow her to pass. It seemed to him that she uttered a faint scream on seeing him, but that might be only from the fear that there would have been a collision. However, she plunged into the dark passage with a light step, leaving behind her a cloud of perfume, which had previously struck the provincial youth.

"Where did I smell that before? Where have I seen that tall and elegant figure? where did I catch the glance of that bold and fascinating eye?"

He instinctively turned round, but the lady had disappeared in the very path which he had trodden. The way was not wholly unfamiliar to her, but she missed the black boy who had ushered her into the fortune-teller's presence, and she stopped at the door of the room.

"He, in this den—what business had he here?" she said to herself in astonishment.

While she was hesitating, the man and woman who had received the squire so churlishly were disputing;

"What a blunder you have made," reproached the hag: "we might have 'nailed' that locket, and sold that secret paper to whoever is most concerned to suppress it, and that would have provided funds for our

flight. If that game would not work, we might have handed it to Therese, who is as generous as the thief's daughter usually is, and one way or the other we should have made something of the affair."

"You are right," returned the other, with a shrug of the shoulders, "unless the whole thing is a fable to trap us. I know this fellow to be a prowler whom I mistook for one of our kidney the night when I was following home the three great ladies who would have been our reliance in a rainy day. Instead of joining hands with me and despoiling the court hussies, he upset me into the gutter—curses on him! that is more like a bully of the police than the gentleman of leisure that he affects to be. Besides, who would be in the Bastille to see old Lesage kick the bucket but a prison guard or such? The sleuth-hounds of Lareynie have so many faces that we must be always on our guard." He filled his cup from the pot, and continued: "We are the last of the old gang in town. La Voisin was burnt alive: Pierre Lesage came to grief as you heard that person tell us;" he made a malignant face; "their daughter has crossed the frontier, waiting for us to join her, especially me, her sweetheart; the rest are scattered—in fact, we are completely separated. We expected to be let alone, as we are thought small fry, not worth hauling in by the net; but we may be under the ban, as this is as likely as not a spy——"

"Spy or no spy, we have missed a chance. If he only comes again——" mumbled the hag.

Three light raps were heard on the door, and caused the couple to look at each other in the same anxiety as before. The knocking was repeated, more loudly than at first and a woman's voice articulated with a remarkable tone of authority:

"Whoever is within, open the door: you are wanted."

The expression was that traditional with the police,

but the feminine voice had encouraged Walton, who smiling said:

"This is one of your customers come to have her fortune told. She falls in timely, by all that is good in wine, for I am down again and my *red rag* (the tongue) feels like an old kernel in a last year's nut."

The woman ran to the door, and let in the masked lady.

Her eyes, glittering in the holes through her mask, rapidly made the circuit of the room, which she failed to recognise from its having been stripped of its adornments and furniture. She scanned the countenances of the pair, as they bowed obsequiously.

"Are we three alone?" she demanded.

"Yes, noble lady," said the man reproachfully.

"Oh, is this you, Walton?" she said as she approached the table. "Hand me a chair."

"Do you know me?" said the man, staring.

"Of course I do, gossip. I need not know you by name to guess what sort of a polished villain you are, to inhabit the old haunt of the daughter of La Voisin."

She sat on the seat which was handed to her. Her nonchalant attitude contrasted with the rogues' trepidation as much as her satin with the sordid aspect of the room.

"You are the mock Englishman whom the great lady saved from the gallows. You are called 'the Author' by the gang because you can write a good hand in various styles, and have pretended to publish philosophical works. You were latterly the deputy of La Voisin and Pierre Lesage, whose daughter you have inveigled. It will not conduce to the closer intimacy between you if she should be informed of the part you played in his sham escape, which has resulted in his decease."

Both her hearers started at this accusation

"As for you, Bosse, you were in the service of

Lesage before the band was dispersed. Am I not well informed?"

"You know more than I do," returned Walton, though there was as much dread as curiosity in his tone.

"After the scandal died away, you thought to resume the old craft, but anew the police became vigilant and the Lesage girl has thought fit to flee, it seems, for the paraphernalia of the so-called Manicarde has disappeared. You are under the ban: you are closely watched and you fear that you may not even attempt to go lest you be arrested. In short, you run the risk of dying of starvation in this house where your confederates and masters made a fortune."

"Alas!" moaned the woman, "that is true. Our powders and salves no longer sell, and our pills go begging. If our medicines were only harmless we would be forced to live upon them."

"Nonsense!" growled her companion: "one can get used to doing without food, but not without drink. It is the days without that which are so long." Walton uttered the phrase with solemnity and his face was convulsed with genuine horror.

"The great ladies are just as frightened as the common ones," went on the hag: "the flames that consumed La Voisin have daunted them, and the lesser dames act like them in the spirit of imitation."

"I do not share this terror," coldly observed the other; "and if you consent to serve me, I shall pay you—never mind your conscience—what is it worth?"

"Speak, lady," said the man, more accustomed to such negotiations than the woman, "we are ready to obey."

"On more than one occasion," began the visitress, lowering her voice, "I had recourse to the talent of Lesage and La Voisin; are you as skilful as they in the art of fabricating that potion which given in a carefully calculated dose, invigorates; in a larger one, plunges into sleep; and in a still larger one, or in a prolonged

series of small portions, causes the sleep without awaking?"

"Madame, I was initiated into all these secrets and have studied with all the masters of my time. I hold the incomparable receipt, which leaves in the subject experimented upon all the semblance of life; while it is carrying into every artery a stream of inevitable death."

"Good?" exclaimed the dame, "I see that you are the man I want."

She laid a heavy purse upon the table. "Bring out to a follower of mine what you speak of, and if I be satisfied with you, you will be fully recompensed. You are watched, so do not attract the attention of the police."

"So I thought," remarked Walton, turning to his confederate: "that was one of Lareynie's spies."

"That officer that I met at the door?"

"Oh, he was an officer, then? At all events he did not glean much here."

"What did he do?" demanded the masked lady imperatively. "I want to know. Speak!"

Walton did not hesitate, but related briefly the interview with the Knight of Locmaria. From the commencement the hearer trembled violently. Her brow frowned behind the black velvet; her eyes were surrounded by a brown ring, and her glance was vacant.

"A locket? what locket? a token of affection perhaps to his daughter on the eve of the death which he divined. There is more in this wizard's craft than all acknowledge. Yet nothing was found upon him that incriminated me. He would never have destroyed that letter of mine—oh, that letter," she muttered, pressing her head between her hands, "what can have become of it?"

Walton had been straining his ear. On catching these last words, he made bold to speak.

"My lady, the old fox passed the paper into the medallion, and that over to some hand which he believed he could trust. But permit me to finish my story."

He did so, while the masked lady sat silent on her seat. Her features had become as still as though they were sculptured in marble; but her eyes blazed and her brain was working furiously.

"So," she mused, "it is this intruder from Brittany who stands in the way; he repulsed my advances; he is the associate, unconscious or otherwise, of this woman who is trying to displace me beside the king; he is now the master of my secret and of my fate! By my faith, he has gone too far in braving me and being a fetter upon me. You shall be my sport, Chevalier Joel, and I begin to believe that you will not arrive at Freiburg without some thorn catching you in the hedges. Friend," said she to Walton, "can you procure for me two stout swordsmen who will do any work set to them, if they are well paid?"

"When do you want them?"

"At once."

The mock Englishman reflected for a moment, then slapping the hag on the shoulder, as she was dozing or pretending so to do, he said:

"Go to the tavern of the 'Dry Well' at the Croix Rouge. Your brother, the Lock-breaker, should be carousing there; bring him with another of his stamp, for there is gold to win with their steel."

The woman went out with a more nimble step than might have been expected of her, but there was the prospect of many a revel.

The acquaintance of the Lock-breaker, the treacherous lieutenant of Colonel Cordbuff, we have had the sad necessity of making; the comrade cut-throat whom he brought was an ex-soldier of the royal guards, with a bully's face, bony, brazen and hardened, with his moustaches waxed and hooked upwards on strong jaws. The

pair saluted the masked lady, with one hand on the sword hilt, the other to their moustache curls.

"Now understand me clearly," said she; "at present this man is on the road to Lorraine. You should recognise him from the description which I gave. You are to get horses and run him down. He carries a locket of which I have need. Rid me of that gallant and bring me the token, and I will give you a fortune."

"Fortune!" observed Lock-breaker. "How much do we get in advance?"

"Fifty pistoles, and you shall have three times as much later on."

"Lady, it is a bargain."

CHAPTER XXIII

EVIL BE TO THEM WHO EVIL THINK

ON receiving from Minister Louvois's own hands the despatches for Marshal Créquy, the Knight of Locmaria left Paris by the St. Martin's suburb. He was in warlike array; spurred, with pistols in the holsters, and sharpened sword by his side, and the horseman's cloak on his shoulders. Esteban accompanied him.

The journey opened sadly, as, under his apparent resignation, the newly married man quitted with regret the part of earth where he had been about to be so happy. In the ride from St. Germain to Paris, the beat of his horse's hoofs carrying him away from that lot in paradise had sounded like a funeral knell. As the horizon enlarged, and the future, full of mysteries, unfolded itself before him, he felt the need to reason with himself, and be completely his master to parry the eventualities and dangers of such a journey.

He rode now with a free spirit if not in gaiety, for the

unconfined breeze was refreshing. His broad chest drank it to the fill of his lungs. The world seemed vast, and he knew he lived and might hope.

In his recollection, Aurore was smiling, and all the more charming a memory from that phrase.

Two things annoyed him. First, the companionship of Esteban, whose swarthy complexion, piercing eyes and smooth tongue inspired in him scanty confidence. Again, he had not had time to continue his leave-taking at the "Blackamoor." What had become of Bonlarron, with his sword as long as Friquet was tall, and that brave lad himself, the jolly companion so tender about his stature? Never mind! he would look them up on his return.

For he had but one thought: to distinguish himself before Freiburg, and return as quickly as possible. Hence he had decided to go twice the usual distance in one day. He planned to pass Chelles and sleep at Lagny. Unfortunately, a little before reaching the skirt of Bondy Forest, as they were passing a little wayside blacksmith's, the man who was hammering on his anvil shouted:

"Your pardon, sir, but your mare will cast a shoe before she goes twenty lengths, for the off-hind shoe hangs by only a couple of nails."

It was true, and they were obliged to stop. Annoyed at the delay, Joel addressed the farrier who had warned him: "Friend, it is not enough to point out this unlucky mishap; but you must help us remedy it."

"Willingly, master; only I am run out of nails, and must send to my brother-smith at Noisy for a supply; but it is only a skip, and I will fasten the shoe on in four blows of the hammer."

"At Noisy?" and the young traveller's brow became more dark. "It is a good distance and the job will take a long time."

"Why, no, for I have my bellows-boy here who has legs like a deer, and will run there in a short half an

hour and another to return, while it will only take me ten minutes to do the job. In better than an hour you will be off again."

"Yes, but this prevents my supping at Lagny."

"But you can sup at Chelles, at the 'Shield of France' inn, which has not its like in the country for roast duck."

"Send your boy off at once," said Joel, dismounting and walking into the smithy. "But how am I to kill the time?" he muttered, while Esteban led the horses into a yard behind the forge. "Stay, I know. I will send news to Aurore—the darling will be uneasy, no doubt. Let us prove that we do not let a moment pass without thinking of her. Master Vulcan," he called out, "can you furnish me with writing materials? and find me some corner in your house where I can sit at a table, and not be disturbed? I will pay for any inconvenience I cause."

The peasant pointed to a ladder-like flight of steps leading up from the smoked corner.

"Go up into my room there. The paper, ink and quill are there with which I make out my bills. And do not hurry yourself, for we will let you know when the job is done."

When the Breton had disappeared, Esteban went up to the smith and made a sign to him.

"Your man is there?" replied the blacksmith, pointing to the partitioned-off place where he stored his small coal.

A door creaked slightly on its hinges, and they saw the hang-dog visage, long body and hooked moustache of Colonel Condor de Cordbuff; on coming forth from the hole, he stretched his limbs like a wild cat leaving its lair.

"In good faith," grumbled he, "I was afraid that the fresh orders would not arrive in time."

"It is clear," observed the lackey, "that if we had not been made to dance attendance on the war minister,

up to noon, his excellency's emissary would not have met me in Paris." In a confidential tone he resumed:

► "So my lord the duke is bent upon finishing the affair straightway, eh? Are we not to go on to Freiburg? is it here the journey comes to an end?"

The ex-colonel of the Royal Marauders pointed towards the sombre forest line as he replied: "Twenty muskets lie behind the outmost bushes? ten a side. From each side of the road the lightning will flash."

A ferocious smile lit up the Spaniard's face, as he approved.

"I like to hear the guns speak, provided it is not to me they have sharp things to say."

"But we must await nightfall," went on Cordbuff, "otherwise this confounded Breton may perceive the glint of the barrels under the leaves."

The Spaniard took a look at the sky.

► "Waiting for nightfall when there is a gale in the air. I have a seaman's eye for storms. Before an hour it will be as black as thunder."

Condor rubbed his hands.

"That is wonderfully good! Though our lads blaze away at random, they will not do the worse work. After we do it, each must shift for himself, leaving the bodies in the middle of the road, so that whoever finds them will lay the blame on the robber Vide-gousset, who infests this part of the country."

"Pardon me," interrupted the lackey, pricking up his ears: "you spoke of 'bodies' in the plural—from some slip of the tongue, I suppose. You meant the body."

► "That's it," Cordbuff rectified the error, but biting his lip. The body of the master and the carcase of his horse—that is what I meant, for the beast will hardly go scot-free from such a volley. But I must hurry to join the ambushade. This cursed fellow knows me from a brush I had with him on the Saumur highway and

the attack in Paris, and it would never do for him to come down, for he would recognise me at once."

"Stay, for one word. Take care that no bullet goes in my direction, please, as I am quick to reply in kind, remember that I shall be close behind him, and I do not want any *fatal blunder* in a jest or by premeditated forgetfulness."

"How can you think of such a thing, my dear comrade?"

Indeed the sky was becoming cloudy. At the gallop sped masses of storm-lined vapour, producing a changeable chaos of light and shade. One of these eclipses of light prevented Esteban remarking the perfidious intention which glistened like the serpent's scales on the adventurer's lips and his eyes while he said:

"It was the duke who gave the orders to my men. So no mistake can be possible, and we shall carry them out."

In the meantime, Joel continued to write, on the upper floor. His pen ran rapidly and he was hardly conscious how time was coursing, too. He was speaking to his dear Aurore whom he saw before him and expected to hear her speak. On the sheets of blackened paper, the phrase "I love you," was often repeated. But it was time to come to an end; he folded up the epistle, and wrote the address.

"What a long time they are," he muttered. "How dark it has become," he added, with some astonishment. "Can it be dusk already, or is it the weather turning bad?"

"Halloa!" he exclaimed to himself, "this is strange!"

The road took a curve before passing the smithy. One of the branches, that travelled by our pair, led from the city; the other went into the Bondy Woods, at a few hundred paces, yet to be threaded by them. The room window commanded the forest skirts, and

the squire mechanically examined the brush. A sun-beam slanted through the slaty grey clouds, and left the house in the shadow; but, on the other hand, it lighted up the thickets and penetrated the foliage to some depth. Thus it came that the looker-out thought he saw men in the coverts, and luminous points like the glint of light upon polished metal. Keeping up his scrutiny, but remaining hidden, Joel could count a score, ten on each side of the road.

"The deuce, this looks like an ambush," he thought.

At this juncture, one man appeared among the glittering dots and waved his hand, so that they faded out of sight: evidently he had perceived the oversight and wanted to prepare it, before he, too vanished in the copse.

"Zounds!" muttered the Breton, "if I had not smashed that scoundrel Cordbuff on the Celestins wharf, I should swear that he is here, organising this little enterprise."

"But whom was this intended for?" As the young knight was putting the question to himself, he heard the clatter of horses' hoofs on the road to Paris. On account of the bend, the new-comers could not perceive the thicket until they passed the forge. Besides, the sun did not shine at this period, and the whole sky was a mass of sable clouds. The wind raised whirls of dust, and heavy raindrops began to sprinkle the ground.

The sound rapidly drew near, and presently two men on horseback rushed by the smithy at full gallop; their steeds were flecked with foam, as if from a precipitous race. One of them was no doubt better mounted than the other, for he preceded him by three or four lengths. Both were pressing on without heeding the rain, or the dust which strove to blind them.

Hardly had they turned the elbow before the men in hiding moved in the foliage and Joel saw them coming forward to bring their guns to bear.

"How now?" muttered he; "can it be for me, or

those fellows that these warlike preparations are made? In either case I cannot let the unsuspecting fall into a deadly trap." He lifted his voice to call out to them, but it was lost in the uproar, and in a trice, the cavaliers were out of earshot.

The brave knight rushed down the stairs, shouting: "Our horses—let us have our horses—quick!"

They stood ready before the forge. Near them was Esteban, his face contracted by anger which in the haste his master did not notice.

"Plague take those outsiders!" muttered the Spaniard, "whom our bullies will mistake for us, and shoot them instead of this new-fledged knight."

Joel who had bounded into the stable, crying: "At full speed and have your sword drawn—we must save those travellers or at least lend them aid."

But, as he dug his spurs into his steed's flanks, several gunshots resounded. In spite of this, the cavalier dashed off with the bridle between his teeth, and in his hands the rapier and pistol. The lackey followed at the same pace.

"It looks as though I shall be obliged to put a bullet into the back of his head," thought he, stretching out his hand to his holsters.

But a few wild shots whizzed about them like angry hornets, and the servant of Aramis uttered a scream of pain: a slug had broken his pistol-arm near the wrist and a bullet had entered his throat. Uncontrolled, his frightened horse carried him in the wake of his master's, which burst into the wood like a hurricane.

Some distance within the skirt of the wood, between natural hedges of undergrowth, two bleeding bodies were stretched, at the side of which Joel with difficulty reined in. Into the pool of blood which they had lost, —Esteban was pitched, by the sudden stoppage of his steed—horrified by the blood and the smell of powder.

The two fated men were those who had caught the volley intended for the Son of Porthos. One of them

was held down under his horse, which had been wounded. The other horse was racing through the forest, which was becoming hushed as though its glades were unpeopled once more. But at a distance was audible the tramp of a troop of irregular cavalry, fading away. It was the company of Cordbuff, obeying the order to make off at will.

Joel hitched his charger to a tree, and examined the dead before he attended to the dying, less interested in his own man than he could account for. The strangers were beyond hope: the first was slain outright as though struck by lightning, and the other was riddled like a sieve. When the young knight terminated this task, he saw that Esteban had come to his senses, and, propped on the elbow of his uninjured arm, was curiously contemplating the two corpses.

"I see," muttered he, careless whether he was overheard or not: "if I had been riding behind the master, as I should have been, I would have received all that shower of lead in my body, instead of two pellets—which, by all that is unlucky, will do the trick, I fear me. Orders were out to slay the valet along with the master: or Cordbuff sought to get rid of a rival who hampered him in trying to enjoy my lord's good graces. Be as it may, the lesson comes too late for me to profit by it. But I can be revenged," he continued, with a scowl of evil augury.

Joel raised him into a sitting position, and propped him against a tree. His wound had ceased to bleed outwardly, but he held his unhurt hand to it as if choking. A deathly perspiration bathed his livid brow; his eyelids closed despite his will, and a red froth bubbled about his mouth.

"Drink," moaned he.

Joel took a flask of wine from his saddlebow and held it to the swaying head, of which the teeth chattered against the cap, used as a cup; but he managed to gulp a mouthful.

"The saints reward you," he gasped.

"Have courage," said his master. "I will ride to the smith's or carry you thither."

An ironical smile flitted over the lackey's lips.

"Do nothing—it is over—I have my account settled."

His eyes slowly opened, and his unsteady gaze wandered over the scene of slaughter; suddenly, kindled by the remembrance of his doom, it shone with a fugitive lustre. "I trust you will revenge me. Oh, that I had a priest ere I die—but it is impossible here. Since there is nothing else, you shall receive my confession, by which you can profit to save yourself perhaps——"

"You are wandering! how save myself?"

"This ambushade was directed against you and me—that wretch of a Cordbuff would not have spared his accomplice."

"Cordbuff, do you say? then it was he whom I spied. Has that cut-purse turned cut-throat?"

"He is your mortal enemy—and not the only one—and the others are more powerful and skilful. They send you to Freiburg to be rid of you—they wanted to kill you, lest you might return."

"But why? who longs for my death?"

"All is spinning round me," muttered the weakening sufferer. "My heart is melting within me. For pity's sake, give me something to drink."

Joel offered him the wine again, and on his swallowing a few drops, a slight flame mounted to his cheeks.

"Oh," said he, hastening as if he feared a crisis would stop his revelation, "listen now, and impress these words in your mind with the indications I give you. Those men fell instead of us, but, you see, I was marked. My master, the Duke of Almada, has bought, on the margin of Marley Woods, a summerhouse not far from the royal residence. In the principal room of the house, on the left of the fireplace, is a secret panel, moving, if you press the spring, in a brass knob con-

cealed in the dado. This opens a way to a subterranean gallery communicating with the palace, ending in one of the rooms of the king's apartments."

"But why do you tell me this?" said Joel. "In what way does it concern me?"

"I see that you do not understand," breathed the wounded man with difficulty. "You think I am in a delirium, raving and out of my senses—but you are wrong—I see clearly and you will understand me later. That secret way is to be used to arrive in time to outstrip the king and prevent——"

"Go on, go on! prevent?"

"Prevent the plot which I overheard arranged, being brought to pass."

His breathing had grown hard, his vision dim, and he held out his hand as his head fell backward.

"More drink!" he panted, "I am dying."

The knight held out the flask this time, but he had hardly more than carried it to his lips than he repulsed it so roughly that it fell on the mossy ground and he hoarsely uttered:

"No, would you send me drunk into the presence of my Maker?"

His features became broken up with frightful rapidity; his upturned eyeballs half disappeared under the distended lids: the flaps of his nose sank, and the scum on his lips changed to a yellow hue.

"What does all this signify?" demanded the Breton, leaning over him; "answer me! what did you hear plotted?"

"I know not—I remember no more. All is dark, and a bell seems sounding in my brain. But that passage will be guarded. Cordbuff and his murderers will be posted to dispute the entrance. *Caramba!* crush them as they did that pair there: and the old chief too. Ah," he shrank back as if to enter into the substance of the tree against which he rested, "it is he who is coming, the sinister white-beard! he comes to strangle

me lest I make the confession!" he rose along the trunk as if to resist or flee from a spectre; his eyes widened with intense terror, and his unhurt hand again clawed at his throat.

"He has seized—he is strangling me!" His skin turned an ashen colour; from his swollen throat a hoarse gurgle issued, and the froth on his mouth was a blackish red.

Joel grasped him, for he would have fallen.

"Once more, speak, I urge you! I beg you—I want to know——"

But no reply came from the lackey, whose head dropped forward on his chest, for he was dead: the wound had flowed inward and his last words were stifled.

Meantime the storm had suddenly been appeased; a last gust had cleared the sky and the sunset was clear and serene. Joel gave a last look to the ghastly battle-field; on the two *bravi* he saw the vile expression which death had not lessened, but he could not guess that they were the hirelings of the Marchioness de Montespan, engaged to pursue him and bring to her the locket in which Pierre Lesage had secreted the incriminatory paper in her hand which he hoped to be the weapon for his daughter's protection. To earn their pay, the ancient lieutenant of Cordbuff and his partner had started forthwith on the man-hunt. They had not spared the spur to overtake the young knight, and had so strained themselves that they had shot in advance of him and received the musketry discharge intended for their betters.

Joel went to the blacksmith's for aid, but that worthy, fearing that his complicity in the outrage might be suspected, had abandoned his house. The young man was therefore compelled to leave the body, and take the two spare horses in leash, to the magistrate of Vitry, where he related the matter to the police. After singing his statement, the king's messenger resumed the

journey, less troubled by the sanguinary scene than by Esteban's strange and incomplete revelations.

➤ Ought he to take them seriously? or consider them the fancies of cerebral derangement inherent to the passage from life to death—the ramblings of a mind filled with incoherence and chimeras by the death throes? was there anything behind the last words, with an enigmatic sense which the dying one had no time to make clear?

What could signify this mystery of the sliding panel, assassins lying in wait, a summerhouse, the royal residence? who were the powerful and skilful enemies who threatened the days of the young knight and had already delivered one blow at those who had by chance been substituted for their victims. What was the reason, and what the aim?

➤ The Duke of Almada could not be the "old man" of whom the Spaniard had passed away in such terror. He might have let him moulder in the Bastille, but he had made him the happiest of lovers, by uniting him to Mdle du Tremblay.

➤ The king could not be an enemy. He had but to frown to be disembarrassed of a dangerous subject or of one simply importunate. In the case of the Knight of Locmaria, he need not have interfered with the march of justice: but he had been great and good, and granted mercy. Besides, in what way could a humble country squire have offended the most Christian King or annoyed the ambassador of the Catholic Majesty of Spain? It is needless to say that no idea struck the honest youth that Aurore had any part in the schemes woven against him. The dying lackey had not spoken of the young lady. So the newly married man was very deeply perplexed. It was in great bewilderment that he reached Nancy, where two letters overtook him in kindness to his poor head: he was obliged to stop a couple of days to rest his charger. One missive was from *her*.

Aurore was already beginning to feel impatience

over the return of the husband of her heart. She was in attendance on the queen at St. Germain's, her royal mistress manifesting more and more affectionate kindness every day. Her companions seemed to like her. Those called "the wise ones," in that dissipated court, surrounded her with attentions and respect. The king was engaged in the important transaction at Nimwegen. He rarely came into his consort's apartments. The writer added that she had not seen anything of the Marchioness de Montespan, while she often met the Widow Scarron, who was living at Pecq with her royal nursery.

"She is a friend whom I value more and more. Need I tell you that you are the subject of all our conversation? and now she tries to comfort me, strengthen me, and restore my faith in the blessedness of heaven and hope in the future, when my thoughts, running away from me on the remote highways, look for you amid the horrors of a siege, the anger of storming parties, and among the dead and the wounded! Oh, my dear brave Joel, take care of yourself for the sake of her who lets no moment go by without remembering that she is your wife. Be guarded as you are brave. Preserve your life as I should your honour."

"How she loves me!" said the knight, "and how truly deserving she is of my love!"

He kissed the paper in ecstasy of delight.

The second message was from Widow Scarron. She assured her correspondent that Aurore gained admiration by her candour, loftiness of character, and frank dislike to vice and wickedness.

"The king, whose confidence I have the honour to enjoy, since I am nearer St. Germain, has notified me now and again, that none among the ladies of the royal household better merits the tokens of esteem and sympathy with which the queen kindly favours her. Aurore is yours, my friend, as the priest is wedded to heaven. You must be the same towards her. Besides I keep

my promise, and I watch over this angel of perfection with the same care which I have for the royal offspring confided to me."

The words in both letters were a balm to him. In neither was there any news of the Duke of Almada. It was clear that the agony and the fever of death had embroiled the wits of Esteban, when his heavy conscience was in turmoil.

Hence our traveller resumed the journey with both head and heart relieved of depression which had almost stifled him.

The roads were rendered heavy from the fact of having been cut up by the wheels of the artillery, among which he was glad to hear was the battery of the new engines of war, the bombards, of which Friquet posed as the inventor, and which it was said would give the signal for the grand attack on Freiburg. Besides, the roads were also dangerous from the numbers of robbers, disbanded soldiers and deserters from both sides who foraged for their own gain, and put all the inhabitants of the Vosges to ransom. For that matter, the chevalier would have preferred to face a company of these highwaymen than ride with the black thoughts which had harassed him before he received the letters.

The weather which was clear at starting became dull when he reached the Black Forest, and it was black as an oven in the glades. Before him, after passing through a vale, dark masses of pines covered the gloomy ridge of a hill. A light sparkled there, of so much greater volume than a cottage candle, that Joël believed it to be a rendezvous of soldiers or an inn.

In this latter conjecture, he was correct, for he recognised by the sign of a "Cooked Crayfish" and the general aspect that he was before one of those humble houses of entertainment which have earned this quarter in more recent ages the title of a land of hotels.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE GIRL AT THE INN

NOTWITHSTANDING there was no one about when Joel rode up, he dismounted on being assured by hearing voices within that it was not deserted, and tying his horse to a ring in the wall, strode boldly into the place.

It was composed of a room, with a staircase at the back, a table in the midst, and a fireplace where some pieces of meat and some split crayfish were broiling and baking.

A tall, brawny man sat by the window, cleaning one of those long-barrelled fowling-pieces which are good for any kind of game. Before being an innkeeper, Kaspar Braun was a soldier in the Thirty Years' War, devoted as now to his emperor and his country. When the French invaded the country, his loyalty was in open rebellion, though on the other hand his good fare and the sacred laws of hospitality through which he had often travelled, earned him a kind of truce. The excuse of his age sufficed, but his sun-burned visage, breathing indomitable energy, and the melancholic gravity special to men living in the solitudes of nature, did not express the weakness for many years. Over his green cloth vest and breeches, the uniform of a forester, he wore a goatskin jacket with the hairy side inward; his high leggings of buckskin were tightly laced over iron spiked shoes; and his hunting-knife hung at his belt. When he rose to welcome the guest, he showed the subdued ferocity of a bulldog under restriction not to bite whilst muzzled.

"What can I do for you, sir?" he asked, with a bow, and using the French mixed with German common on the border where the armies of both powers so often met.

"Why, many things, my good man of the woods,"

gaily rejoined the cavalier: "accommodation and food for myself, and shelter and provender for my steed at the door. I suppose a supper is possible?"

The old forester smiled grimly?

"Nothing is impossible now on the frontier, if the money is forthcoming, and you are not in a hurry."

"You shall take your own time, and as I have escaped the knights of the road, I need not look to the expense."

"Awake, you sluggard wench from Paris," shouted Braun. "Go and put the gentleman's horse in the stable and hurry back to do the cooking."

This was spoken in German, but the guest had already acquired a smattering of the language and the result of the speech enlightened him as to the meaning. To his surprise, a recumbent figure which he had not suspected, rose in the fireplace; but he did not utter the exclamation almost on his lips as, while the German put his gun in a rack on the wall, this woman laid her finger signifying caution on her mouth. She was small and brisk, her manner, petulant, quick and restless, and her saucy and brightly vulgar features spoke of the daughter of Lutetia. In her peasant's dress she looked like the buxom girls of the Rhenish inns.

"There is a basin of fresh water over there," said the innkeeper, sullenly pointing to the farther end: "you may want to get the dust of the road off you. And if your trappings are in your way, I will relieve you of them."

Braun referred to the guest's rapier and horse-pistols which he had brought in with him, stuck in his belt.

"Many thank, my good friend," said Joel, still smiling: "I am used to the articles and they do not incommode me."

The other seemed vexed, but he spoke calmly enough: "Just as you like, my master. Then, since I can do nothing for you, let me go and get some wine."

He went away to the end of the room and raising a trap-door, descended by a short ladder into the cellar. Scarcely had he gone when the girl returned; but she seemed afraid to venture many words to the new-comer, to whom, as she paused to blow up the fire, she gave a strange look as though to say: "Be on your guard. We are watched."

To pass away the time and give himself a countenance, the Frenchman pretended to study the coarse prints stuck against the wall to relieve the monotony of the plastering. They were mostly pictures of saints, or battles.

"What can all this strange reception mean?" he wondered. "A German host and a French servant, who is certainly not his wife or his daughter, but in as much awe of him as though she were either."

Meanwhile, the man had returned and placed two bottles of Rhine wine on the table, where the woman arranged a cloth, two china vases with woodland flowers, a slice of cold roebuck with berry sauce, a hare pie, some sliced smoked sausage, and a polished pewter goblet. While busying herself at the board, she made the Son of Porthos a sign which meant that he might drink without fear. Then she returned to the revived fire, where she deftly and rapidly cooked an omelet, and dished a rabbit which had been stewing some time.

On sniffing the aroma of these eatables and feasting his sight on the cold side-pieces already ranged on the board, our hero flung his hat on a chair, and cried: "To table!"

Braun darted an angry look upon the woman and said: "Well, do you not see that the gentleman's weapons are in his way?"

This return to the previous charge irritated the guest, who retorted angrily: "Never mind! I am learning to be a soldier, and I am trying to get used to eating and drinking in my equipment."

"So, the gentleman is a soldier?" broke forth the innkeeper, in a voice which he tried to make appear more innocent than it would have seemed to more experienced ears.

"Yes: though I am more of a despatch-bearer than anything at present, being on my way from Paris to Marshal Créquy."

It so happened that the good dinner was doing its softening work and, besides, Joel was on the very verge of accomplishing his mission, and he did not even feel a twinge at this too frank admission of his errand in a debatable land where both parties roved.

The innkeeper's face scowled as much as the strange waitress's brightened at his refusal to lay aside his weapons. The Breton showed the thickness of his skull by drinking a bottle to the omelet, a second to the venison and he called for a third to wash down the preserves.

It was now night, and lights were lit.

"Do you like the wine? it is some of my own," said Braun, rather more amiably.

"It is very good. I shall like this country!"

The host proposed fetching some more, but at this time, as the young soldier caught the eye of the servant, he saw in her face a warning gesture. That he had in this fellow-countrywoman a friend in the possibly hostile camp, he did not doubt, and he took the hint.

"But it flies to the head," he went on, gaping frightfully; "either that or my long ride has made me tired and sleepy."

The landlord rose from his seat and took up a candle to light it with a splinter at the fire.

At this chance of gesticulating behind his back, the waitress took a step or two, reeling as if it were she who had taken too much wine.

"Ah," thought the knight. "I shall conform to these hints, which mean something."

And rising to take the candle, he tottered as if the floor were oscillating.

"What is the matter," he said, clutching at the table, "one would think that the wind is high in the hills and rocks your old house like a ship at sea. Oh, it must be the little vintage of which you brag. Satanic beverage—I shall have a headache for this if I do not sleep it off."

Braun laughed heartily.

"It is mild as milk," answered he, putting the candlestick in his hand, as if to prevent the servant accompanying the guest to his room. "Sleep will cure you. After a good night you will not feel a bit of it. You will wake up to-morrow morning as gay as a lark. But let the maid hang up your firearms. You see that even I hang my gun up; we now live in the times of peace since the French drove away the Duke of Lorraine; and they shall be cleaned like my old ducking-gun, when you don them in the day."

The waitress surreptitiously shook her head, and as with a calm face she extended her hand, Joel gallantly chucked her under the chin and said: "Hold there! the old priest who taught me, told a pretty tale of Venus in the armour of Mars—but, oh dear! all has become mixed in my head—to bed, to bed!"

He had the heavy look like the falsely sparkling eye of the cavalier who has drunk too deeply.

"Go on, my honoured guest. It is only to oblige you. Go right up—there is but one room at the head of the stairs. The bed is under the window. Do you want anything more?"

"No, I have lost my man along the road, and must get used to tucking myself in. Good-night, master, and my pretty maid! Peace on all under your roof-tree!"

Braun echoed the wish but in the tone of a funeral oration. He fastened his eyes on the woman, who looked demure and guileless, as both listened to the

irregular tread of the stumbling youth, who reached the door in front of him on the landing, kicked the door open and staggered to the bed, on which he seemed to fall. The couch was heard to groan and creak under the unusual weight, and soon a loud snore thundered in the loft. A sinister delight appeared on the forester's browned face and he muttered.

"Drunk, tired and asleep. The cat is in the bag. A bearer of despatches, eh? I must have a word with Walton about this before we settle him."

He took down his gun and put on his tall felt hat, adorned with an eagle's wing.

"Madame Therese," he went on in a low stern voice, "I am going to meet Walton. If the man upstairs moves, blow the horn, and we will come to your aid."

Joel was listening overhead and as soon as he heard the host depart, he quickly rose; there was nothing painful or uncertain in his steps and no appearance of drunkenness or fatigue existed in his whole frame. He had no need to be a soothsayer to divine that his money, his despatches or his life were at stake. So he looked to his pistol and loosened his sword in its sheath.

After a while, he heard a light but incautious step on the stair, and he opened the door so that he might have free swing to his sword and a broad opening for his shot. It was the figure of the woman which appeared, and he lowered his weapon.

All was in darkness as he had prudently extinguished his candle but his sight was accustomed to the gloom, and her eyes sparkled like gems.

"So you have come to tell me something?" he began.

"Sufficient to satisfy you. We have an hour before us as the man has gone to keep an appointment and get help, perchance. This estimable forester makes it a practice to get soldiers and travellers drunk and kill

them in their sleep. Thus he serves his cause and gleans secrets of military movements by which his employers benefit."

"Why did you not tell me at once, when I should have cut him down on the eve of his abominable project?"

The two were out on the landing now.

"Because I had my doubts of the result—Braun is a tough old soldier. When he heard that you carried despatches, he knew that you had a greater value than a chance passer-by, and he goes to consult with one who is an expert in such secrets. They have suggested to me before, as I am French, that I should decoy young officers and thus deliver the general's plans to our enemy."

"Well?"

"The opportunity has not happened before this, and——"

"Love for your country would make you repulse the suggestion?"

"I do not know—this man whom Kaspar Braun has gone to meet is a tyrant—a demon. Have you never heard in Paris of the criminal associate of La Voisin and Lesage, the chief who contrived to escape after a temporary arrest—the 'Englishman,' the 'Author?'—and author he is of many a crime."

"I know little of Paris but I learnt something of the affair of the Poisoners."

"By-and-by I will acquaint you with what he is: enough that he is a thorough villain who will not need the whet of your carrying despatches to ally himself with Kaspar to kill you in your bed. He has told me, on rejoining me from Paris, whence I was a fugitive, that he must obtain information of importance in order to sell it to Prince Charles for his protection, a shelter and money, so that he may gratify his dread ambition."

"This wretch is your lover, then?"

"My torturer—the living reminder of a past, the recollection of which appears before me like a burning fire. Fate has chained us together like two convicts in the galleys. Perhaps I loved him once. To-day, I submit to him—I am forced to serve him, but I hate him. Never mind me, though," she went on, drawing nearer Joel, who towered above her on the stairs: "I repeat that the innkeeper will soon return with Walton or another. In these frontier villages are plenty of deserters whom a gold coin converts into murderers. At need, Walton would persuade Braun, who has some human weakness in him, to join hands with the camp-followers and villagers who throng the woods."

"Let them come," muttered the youth, clapping his hand on his swordhandle with a joyous, fearless gesture.

"Yes, I understand that you will defend yourself against a score or more, but at the sound of the affray a scouting party of the Germans may run up and then you would be overpowered. Besides, though Braun would attack fairly enough, it is not the same with Walton who employs the devil's weapon, fire, with all the devil's cunning. He is capable of firing this house."

"Who cares——"

The young woman grasped his sword-arm, saying in a sweet voice: "But how about *her*?"

"What 'her'?"

"The woman whom you love and who loves you—whom you left behind?"

"Aurore!"

"Ah, is that her name? I do not know anything about her, but this is true—a man who loves and is beloved has no right to rush rashly into danger."

"Aurore!" repeated the chevalier, with pendent head.

"If you were to get killed, what would become of her? who can tell but she may need your sword and

arm even at the present moment! Again and yet again, think, oh, think of her! Think of me, too, for heaven's sake! when that scoundrel learns that I betrayed him and his accomplice to save you, my life will no longer be safe. I do not want to be murdered before I have time to plead to the Judge on high by my repentance——"

The Breton felt overcome.

"Well, what do you ask?" said he.

"I have not only kept the harness on your horse, which will be rested, but I have equipped Walton's, on which pair we may flee. All I beseech you is to place me somewhere where he may not find me—a convent or the like.—But follow me without sound——"

"Run away before such scum?" said Joel, with a rebellious movement.

"I will show you how to meet him another time," said the woman savagely.

He followed her down the stairs with as light a step as possible. They reached the inn door but Therese only stopped there to listen to the sounds without.

"The better way is to leave by the back door," murmured she. "It seems to me that the road is not lonely. Come on."

But on passing through a low, narrow door which gave the Frenchman's robust body a squeeze, and finding themselves in a kitchen-garden, where the vine flourished on trellises, the guide suddenly seized her companion by the arm and dragged him under a kind of bower: here in the hot weather boon-companions discussed the vintages of which Braun boasted beneath the leaves of the vine which bore them.

Three dark figures entered the stableyard by the simple process of striding across the hedge at a bound. Joel recognised the tallest as the innkeeper's; he was accompanied by wearers of cloaks and swords, but

only one of them had a soldierly bearing. This one seemed treated with respect by the others.

"What meant that light going out as we came up?" questioned this man in a voice trained to give orders.

"My lord," answered Kaspar, "I should say that it was the wife of this gentleman, who thought all was ended for the night, and she has gone to bed. But I can make certain——"

Then leaning towards the mute and cloaked third party, he whispered: "Get through with your business with the prince, that we may attend to this French officer. Confound it all, I fear that your wife may give an alarm."

"Fear not," replied Walton in the same undertone; "she is as subservient to my will as the cane which I wield."

He carried a cane with a horn head, like the gentleman of fashion in town who wish always to be accustomed to holding a weapon.

The person addressed as a lord had impatiently waited for this brief colloquy to come to a close. Thereupon he said: "Keep quiet. We can confer just as well in one of these arbours. As for you, Kaspar, go and watch at the gap on the road. There are too many prowlers about after dark for precautions to be neglected, and as an old woodsman, I know you can be relied on."

At this, Joel shrank farther back behind the leafy screen.

Whether by instinct or that he had not the profound faith in Therese which Walton manifested, Braun was reluctant to do this, and he muttered:

"Will not your highness do his faithful servant the honour of remaining within, and accept what I have in the cupboard and the cellar?"

"Be easy, my dear Kaspar," said the prince, clapping him on the sturdy shoulder, "I will go into your house and sit at your board, but not until we shall

have cleared out these accursed foreigners, who have impudently come upon the imperial soil. Then, I promise you, we will drink the best vintages of your Rhenish wine to the disgrace of the vanquished foe, and the joy of Freiburg with the siege raised."

CHAPTER XXV

AN INVOLUNTARY SPY

"Is it possible that this can be the Duke Charles?" said Joel in a low tone: but his companion, frightened into stupor, did not answer; she had sunk upon a seat in the arbour and wrung her hands in muteness.

Braun, with a glance up at his house, strode to his post to act the sentinel: the other two, occupying the bower adjacent to that which concealed the knight and his guide began their dialogue. The prince sat on the bench, leaning both hands on his knees. The so-called Englishman remained standing, with his hat off, in a respectful attitude, and as the starlight outlined his features, the watcher was amazed: it was the man who had met him in the house of the Manicarde in the Rue Bouloi and stopped his searches for Therese Lesage. The coincidence of the woman's name, a common one, furnished no clue, but he could not help thinking that this meeting was strange: he had no time to indulge in trying to solve puzzles, for the interesting dialogue had commenced. They used the same border language as Braun to the Chevalier de Locmaria, a mixture of French and German words, but Walton spoke with choice phrases here and there like one who had communed with the great.

"Yes, my lord," said Walton, "I have ridden all the way from Paris with news for your highness."

"Good or bad?"

"Both, your highness."

"Let me hear the bad news, sir!"

"For the success of the campaign, no further reliance should be placed upon the Duke of Saxe-Eisenach, who, after having retreated before Montclar's French forces, stupidly let himself be cornered on an island in the Rhine, by Strasburg, where he has surrendered."

"Yes," said the prince, turning pale, "you are right; this is bad news—worse—disastrous!" He wiped the perspiration from his forehead with the back of his hand. "What next, sir? quick!" he said in a sharp tone.

"Well, my lord, you must not count on the sixty thousand men with whom you promised to relieve Freiburg and re-enter Lorraine——"

"How is that?"

"His Imperial Majesty, from whom you expected this succour, requires all his troops to put down the insurrection in Hungary."

"Ah!"

"Furthermore, his ministers judge the position of France so strong that they have resolved to accept without discussion the conditions which that power imposes at the treaty-congress held at Nimwegen."

His listener was whiter than the handkerchief with which he wiped his face as the spy continued:

"The fact is, the army which collected under Basle, and which you were to take the command of and relieve Freiburg, has started this very morning for Vienna, with orders to march quickly so as to deal with the rebels."

"What!" exclaimed the prince in a rage, "so fade my hopes and expectations! Fie on this Prince of Saxe-Eisenach and this Leopold, suggested to be my brother-in-law! two Varuses—one, a coward, and the other a perjurer! who will restore me their legions?" he rose and stood in a shaking fit of rage. He breathed

hard, and opened his coat as if to bare his breast to his dagger. "Is there nothing now left for me on earth? nothing that men hold in respect? gone are plighted faith, the ties of family and the soldier's honour!"

He appeared to be choking; but overcoming his emotion after falling upon the seat, he said with a wearied gesture:

"Have you some more gall from that cask to pour out to me?"

"My lord, I have finished with the bad news."

"It is true—you said some was good. Well, speak, my man. I hope what is to come is not so disagreeable!"

"Your highness is the judge. In the first place, your highness is aware that the French are short of artillery before Freiburg."

"But it is being forwarded: I hear of a battery being planted."

"Of guns on a new system and of recent invention?"

"Precisely; of great execution."

"Very likely; but it will be a long time before this battery can be utilised."

"Do you think so?"

"Certainly, my lord, because the pieces are useless without the proper powder and projectiles, which are loaded in wagons, which have stuck in the road on the Vosges Mountains; it will have taken days to dig and haul them out; and though they are due to-morrow night they will not arrive if they are cut off."

"Eh?"

"The wagons will be escorted by dragoons; say, some thirty men at most—enough in a safe country, and your regular soldiers are withdrawn; but I have had a chat with an old freelance captain, and he has a band of fifty desperadoes waiting at Colmar to intercept them."

"Did you do this?"

"They await orders, my lord. And I have done better than that as I came along. On hearing that peace will be signed at Nimwegen, a number of brave lads who dote on warfare, for what gain it brings them, have deserted so as to co-operate with others, and there are at Oppenau upwards of eight thousand men."

"Eight thousand rough soldiers at Oppenau,—only a few leagues away?"

"I, who knew most of their leaders when we campaigned in Flanders, had the idea of enrolling them under your highness's colours. Your highness has this extra legion then, to lead to victory and booty—or death."

The prince frowned.

"Is it partisan war that you propose to me?"

"Any kind of war is feasible when it serves one's purpose."

"I am a general of armies, not a captain of plunderers."

"But a general is useless when he has no army!" returned Walton with boldness, at which Joel conceived a higher opinion of him.

"Fellow!"

"Pshaw! I give your highness credit for having a mind too superior to take offence at mere words. Come to this pass, what were the companions of Romulus? a handful of blackguards scooped up along the highway for the organised robbery called conquest! what the grand companies of freelances which Duguesclin gathered to fight the King of Navarre? what the knights who helped William the Conqueror to take England? Adventurers! Allow these desperate men to place you once more in possession of your rights. You can discipline them into regiments and their captains will make as good a figure in history, I warrant you, as those who burnt towns under Marshal Turenne, pillaged Lorraine under Créquy, ravaged

Germany under Gustavus Adolphus, and nearly upset your empire under Wallenstein. Besides, your highness must lose no time. The hour is at hand. The capture of Freiburg by the French will mean your impotence to fly to the help of those whom you led to ruin—all Europe will see this clearly; it will scorn you to-morrow and repudiate you thereafter. Do you wish to act over again the part your uncle Charles IV. played, vagabond, dispossessed, and starved—and which you have had some experience in? Do you want Louis XIV. to cast you a slice of territory as a crust is tossed to a dog? Would you like to rule over the three bishoprics with Toul for a capital? If you are this kind of sovereign and commander, I will take my leave. Consider that I never came so far to seek you out; and that I sounded the secrets of the intriguers in Paris for another confidant than you. Think you that I have pretended to sell drugs with the risk of being burnt alive, for the purse of gold they earned, now and then? No! I will go straight to some one more ambitious, more audacious and more enterprising than your highness."

"The Author" had found a hearer if not his opportunity at last: be sure that Joel listened to the whole with avidity. Therese had heard some such sentences before, and the eloquence was wasted on her: sitting on the bench, she hid her face in her hands and wept silently.

The Prince of Lorraine meditated: he was a well-read man, and he muttered:

"*Qui jacet in terra non habet unde cadat.*"

Which meant on his lips that he was on the ground and could fall no farther. If he moved, he might risk all to win all. While he reflected, the tempter regarded him eagerly, dusting his fine boots, which he owed to the bounty of Mdme. de Montespan, as well as his suit of riding clothes.

"Supposing," said Duke Charles, finally raising his

head, "I consent to use the men you offer me, do you think they will have any chance against a well-disciplined army?"

"Yes, if the Freiburg garrison, also good regular troops, makes a general sortie at the same time as these irregulars attack them in the rear."

"That may be."

"This is not all. I should want this day of attack to be that when the French made an assault in force on the stronghold. I am told that a secret mine is ready loaded for such a storming party. I would lure the enemy upon the wall so undermined and apply the torch when a simulated retreat brought them over the volcano. Then, when the most daring spirits of the foe were blown into the air, I would have the free companies charge with your regulars and the garrison issue by the other gates to rout the demoralised foe."

"You mean by this that you are to be inside the fort?"

"Yes, in order to give your lordship the signal when to make the attack with the combined forces."

"You would enter the place?"

"I shall be inside in a day or two."

"But you must pass through the French camp?"

"I am French, though born in London: I see no difficulty in this—it is my business: I shall find some pretext, some disguise, some means. Trust to one who has an inventive wit. When I decide on anything, the devil, somewhat related to me, I believe, never fails to come to my assistance."

"If success crown your efforts, sir, I shall lie under great obligations to you."

"In working for your highness," said Walton, "I am working for myself. I built up a fortune in Paris, but as I was putting on the roof, a gale arose, and all has vanished. I have fled with my mistress, my lord, and I come to your highness, because we are birds of a feather—I mean down in the world."

Lorraine frowned, as this resemblance did not more than half please him.

"But," went on the other, understanding this repugnance; "let the more pressing case be attended to. Is your highness willing to take measures in connection with the plan I have the honour to propose? May I know on what day he would give battle to the French Marshal?"

The duke reflected before replying:

"This is Monday. To-morrow I shall go over to Oppenau to put myself at the head of your partisans; on Friday night we will make the attack. May this day repay us for that at Consarbruck when we were defeated! But," he resumed, turning to the other, "I repeat to you, this final effort has only the hope of success in the concurrence of the garrison, the explosion of the mine beneath the storming party, and of the population of the town."

"Just so; the storming party shall be lured on to destruction for I shall be within Freiburg to-morrow. On the fixed night signal to me that you are ready to fall on."

"A rocket from this house will warn you that we are about to attack."

"A rocket: that will do; hold it as certain then, that all the men able to carry arms will sally out to crush the French. Rely on me, my lord, for our aims are alike."

To the relief of Joel, the duke arose to point out that the interview was over, but Walton did not budge.

"Still a few minutes, my lord! all is not settled between us. Your highness has apparently omitted one essential point."

"Ah!" said Lorraine, "I have forgotten that all services must be paid for and that we have not yet fixed the price."

"Your highness is wrong," returned Walton,

shaking his head. "When success has come, then your highness may value it in proportion to the gains."

"Deuce take him!" muttered the general. "He asks for nothing, and so his terms will be terribly dear."

"Just another little matter, my lord: it is understood that I am to enter the town. Should I not have some credentials to present to the governor on which he will obey the instructions which I carry from your highness, and show me the mine, which I want to fire with my own hand," said he with a fiendish grin which caused the warrior to shudder. "Otherwise the worthy officer will suspect me to be a spy, and he will apply to me the expeditious methods of the laws of war—which will not sensibly advance your highness's affairs."

The duke pondered for a moment.

"Yes," said he, taking out a note-book, of which every page was stamped with his cypher so as to be recognised by his military officers. "Braun answers for you to me, and I can answer for you to others—to a certain degree. I will furnish you with what you wish." He wrote on the page with pencil and read the words aloud.

"To Colonel Schultz, Governor of Freiburg. Colonel: We wish you to receive the bearer of the present note with the honours due an envoy of ours and to favour him with all he may wish for the good of our service and the defence of the place."

"That will do!" observed Walton.

"Stop!" said the prince, who resumed.

"If, however, this said envoy proffers the advice to surrender the said place, or he appears to commit any act contrary to the defence, or seems in any way to be in collusion with the enemy, do not hesitate to punish him straightaway with the penalties prescribed

by the law for spies and traitors. Watch him carefully and at the first suspicion, hang him. These are our express orders."

He looked at the traitor fixedly and asked:

"Do you understand this?"

"Yes, my lord," rejoined Walton, who indeed followed the text with a clearer head than Joel brought to the task of comprehending German.

The duke signed the paper and detached the leaf.

"The colonel knows my writing," said he, "therefore the authenticity will not be disputed. I warn you that he is a man who will execute the orders though he had to do so with his own hand."

Walton snapped his fingers, so naturally that the prince was deceived. He held out the paper, saying:

"Go, and mind that it is not found upon you, should you come across any of the soldiers of Marshal Créquy."

"I must come near to him, my lord, since I reckon on him to help me into Freiburg."

"Ah?"

"I shall call on him, as the bearer of despatches from the war minister, Louvois. I left Paris with the intention of securing them; I have distanced the messenger on the road, and I know where to lay my hand on them."

Joel shuddered in the ambush, to think that he might have been sleeping at this hour, unconscious of his impending danger.

"I will transmit to your highness a copy of the documents, and as for this pass, I have a secret place here in which I defy the cunning ones to find it."

He touched the head of his cane and showed that it was innocent enough in itself; he detached the ferrule, and the stick apparently sounded solid; but about half-way down, one of the ornamental knots, whence the twigs were trimmed, proved to be fictitious and dis-

closed a hole. He rolled up the paper and inserted it therein. Fastening the pieces together, he cut the air with it and said jauntily: "That is the secret, my lord. It is not the French who will ferret out the letter of your highness."

The chevalier had missed no detail of the manœuvre. Duke Charles V. and his ally proceeded towards the door of the stableyard and exchanged some words with Braun, who had stood like a statue, surveying the road.

The prince's features were depressed with lassitude, disgust and repugnance as he went out to join his escort in a hollow.

"What a great shame and pity that a prince of my race, related to the most illustrious houses of Europe, should be reduced, to fight destiny, to ally himself with the accomplice of the Poisoners of Paris!"

"What a pity!" sighed Joel in his ambush, "that I cannot make this capture—the Lorraine prince, the implacable adversary of Marshal Créquy, and France! I must needs let him go when I had but to put my finger on him. The marshal would have congratulated me before the whole army; the king would have called me home to overwhelm me with honours, riches, and decorations—but all is lost! it is not at all certain that I shall capture this renegade."

Indeed, the sham Englishman and Braun were speaking by the hole in the hedge. The silence in the house gave them a twinge of suspicion.

"Bah!" said Walton, at last, as he preceded the German on the way to the house, "I can answer for the woman. We will send her up to see if the man is asleep, and if so, we will make an end of it. Did you hear? those papers he carries must be my passport into the presence of Marshal Créquy. He will be too glad to get them to look closely at my story of how I met the bearer, wounded to the death by bandits, and confiding them to me. He will welcome the Frenchman

who did his duty and would not try to sell them to the Prince of Lorraine."

He drew his sword, and with the innkeeper, armed with his knife, they entered the house.

"Now is our time," whispered the woman, hearing the nearness of her persecutor.

They ran to the stable: the large door was on the jar, and the two had the horses out in a twinkling. Joel swung himself into the saddle and helped the woman into hers; the saddle was not suited to the feminine mode, but there was no time to rectify it, and she mounted as best she could. As an incentive to their speed, they heard in the inn angry words, oaths, and shouts, and divined that their absence was discovered.

Side by side the two horses leaped the hedge at the gap, and Joel, half-turning, asked:

"Where shall we go?"

"To the French camp at Freiburg, of course."

"No, the very one they will take: did you not hear that the roads which led thither are infested by camp-followers. Loss of time is nothing compared with the loss of my despatches. Let us take some other road and let them give chase as they may at random."

"Very well. They will also try to throw themselves between us and the only bridge, while we can cross at another spot, by a ferryman's boat. We are sure to reach it by keeping to the riverside as soon as we strike it."

"Hasten then, into the woods; but I am sorry not to have given the traitors a taste of my steel and to have exchanged shots with the villainous innkeeper, he, with his long gun, I with my pistols, which I am glad I brought with me."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE FORTUNES OF WAR

THE two rode through the wood as the false dawn peeped: but it was gloomy under the trees; their horses were fatigued by the soft soil of rotted leaves and the vines which caught at their fetlocks.

"Alas," the young woman continued her revelation, "one may not choose one's parents, and my mother—God forgive her! one whose name will ever arouse a shiver of terror and horror. She was an accoucheuse when she fell in with my father, who under pretence of teaching her black magic—for she practised white magic and told fortunes to ladies—instructed her to manufacture poisons, among them the superfine powder which floats about so that the maker must wear a glass mask, and the elixir which is distilled from the jewel in the toad's head. My parents kept a store where all vices and passions could find help and satisfaction, and they had numerous customers—wives whose husbands were a clog upon them, husbands who wished to be rid of their wives, high-born dames who were hampered by a rival, heirs to estates who had run through their patrimony, ambitious statesmen impatient to be promoted, place-hunters, enemies who flocked hither to buy the means of rapidly contenting their interests and wicked propensities."

"Hearken!" interrupted Joel, as he heard in the distance the passing of a troop of horse.

In the silence of the morning, the hoofs on the clayey soil of the highway could be heard distinct as blows of a hammer.

"We are pursued," continued he: "they are at about the spot where we turned out of the main road: they are going on—they have gone on."

The sound indeed lessened and soon died entirely away.

"It was there that I first saw that man Walton," proceeded Therese. "He went by the name of the 'Englishman,' because he was born in London of gipsy parents. He is cowardly, perfidious, cruel, rapacious, and abominably perverted: but he is active, intelligent, educated, and of good manners and artful language. It was he whom the band employed to negotiate with the Marchioness de Montespan, through her maids, when she purposed compassing the king's removal."

"The king's removal?" repeated Joel, starting in the saddle.

"At the period," went on the woman emphatically, "when the beautiful Fontanges was preferred to her by Louis, for the moment——"

"Such a crime seems incredible," protested the knight, "and by the favourite of the king?"

"She would not have hesitated to sacrifice her royal lover to the pain, and wrath, and shame of seeing him fascinated by another. Besides, the proof of what I assert exists, couched at full length in a letter written by the marchioness to my father to ask for the poison."

Joel did not hear this last sentence, as he was listening to a sound in another quarter. A rumble was heard and a damp chilly wind came to fan their cheeks.

"It is the river," said Joel.

Ten minutes after, they came out on the bank of the Rhine; the moon slanted as it paled before the aurora and made the willows seem an army of spectres. As they followed the water at a slow pace, the woman pursued:

"How was I entangled by such a miscreant? Can I explain the infatuation otherwise than by the circle in which I was brought up? Panderers and witches, sham priests and homicidal chemists, who professed nothing but the cult of evil, feared nothing but the police officers, and were ignorant of a conscience. In

short, he became my master, to the satisfaction of my mother, for I was a reproach to her as long as I remained honest; my father, however, who loved me as the tiger loves his young master, alone tried to wrest me from the claws of this devil.

" 'He will poison you some day,' " he warned me.

" At least, he beat me, robbed and deceived me, but I loved him all the same——"

" Is not that the house you meant?" inquired Joel.

While listening to the tale, he continued to scan the ground, and as he spoke he stretched out his hand to a cabin of logs and rudely shaped timber by the river-side, on a knoll. A boat was riding on the tumultuous tide among the reeds, at the end of a rope attached to a pile. Leaping down from his horse, the chevalier knocked on the door, until a man's voice halloo'd from within:

" What do you want?"

" Friend, we are in want of your assistance," replied the Breton.

" We will give anything you ask for your services," added the woman, also alighting.

They heard the clinking of flint and steel as the fisherman struck a light. The door opened slowly, and the ferryman made his appearance on the sill: an old thick-set man, with a tanned complexion, who held up a lantern to examine the visitors, and in the other hand held a boat-hook to defend his home.

" My good man," said Joel, " we want to be put on the other side."

" It is not easy in the morning fog; the current is swift and my flat boat is leaky."

" Service of the King," returned Joel, " and if we are drowned the price will not be exacted of you. And, on my own service, you must obey or I shall be forced to deal with you summarily. Steel or silver—take your choice." And he slapped his sword-pommel.

" If it comes to that," replied the other, frightened,

"I will do my best with a nail, a scrap of tarred canvas and a plug——"

"How much time is this work to take?"

"Not more than twenty minutes, I think."

"Very good," said the young officer, with a stern tone that was terrifying; "if in half an hour at the farthest, we are not in the middle of the stream, you will be going down to the bottom of it, with a stone round your neck."

While the old man hurriedly made the repairs to the boat, the pair entered the cabin and sat down.

"How did you come from Paris to this part of Lorraine and Alsace?" asked Joel of his companion.

"Alas," said the daughter of La Voisin, "it was my fate, I suppose. Divine clemency was worn out, and human justice was goaded on. One morning, M. Lareynie had all of us arrested, and the *Chambre Ardent* took up our case. My unhappy mother was condemned to capital punishment and was executed with over thirty of her accomplices. My father was sentenced to imprisonment, and I was pardoned on account of my youth, and my lover by his turning informer. We were banished, but, after a tour in England, we slipped back into Paris where I carried on my mother's trade in the *Rue Bouloi*, under the name of the *Manicarde*. I was soon fashionable, as I had my mother's craft at my finger's ends and Walton knew all the secrets of court and city ladies. But I was in fear of a descent of the police, and, unnerved, sick of the business, I made a bold step and took to flight. I wandered in this direction because I thought that war would be a bar to justice, I hoped, too, that my lover would never see me again. In this I was wrong, for he overtook me at *Brisach* and the bond was fastened on me again. He talked of entering into the pay of Duke Charles, sure to welcome any enemy of France. If we had nothing to sell him, he proposed pushing on to Vienna, where he expected me to dupe some court

lady and obtain state secrets which we might dispose of to the highest bidder. In short, we might return to Paris, to resume the old trade. But this time the scales fell from my eyes. I understood that this man was an enemy of our race, and shame drove out of me the mad passion for him. But I am a woman, feeble, and seeking aid—you came across my path and——”

“Unfortunately, I cannot take you into the camp,” objected the chevalier.

“It matters not, I have already spoken of the convent. Well, I have jewels to pay for my entrance into some holy house; I am eager for oblivion and repose. I wish to sink into the protective shadow of the cross, where I will kneel to implore pardon for my misdeeds. I wish to repent and pray—pray for my mother, who has expiated her crimes upon the scaffold, and for my father, who will expiate his in some dungeon——”

“You have mentioned some names, but I do not exactly know what are those of your father and mother.”

“It costs me an effort to utter them, before which the Parisians cross themselves as at sight of an infernal apparition. Nevertheless, if you insist——”

“Do not believe that it is mere curiosity which impels me. My persistency has another cause and another aim. I am charged with a mission, and you may be the very person for whom it is intended.”

“What mission—what person—speak!”

If he had spoken, she would not have heard, for louder than his voice sounded one on the bank:

“There they are! I recognise my horse, tied to that tree. Ten crowns to whoever will dash down and prevent them mounting.”

“The boat,” shouted Joel, springing out of the cabin.

“It is repaired. Step in! I am in haste to put off.”

Joel took the woman up in his arms and placed her in the boat. But the old man lost his wits as the enemy

came down the bank, forced to dismount and lead their horses, and threatening to reach them in a mass. His trembling hand made a blunder in detaching the rope in the stake, and he gasped: "Holy Mother!" without any progress.

"Let go that—get to your pole and push her off," said Joel, and seizing the stake, driven deeply into the bank, he plucked it up as easily as a gardener draws a radish from the soil.

"Take care, chevalier, take care!" screamed the woman.

Three of the ruffians whom the poisoner had already picked up on the road ventured to ride down the steep bank. Two had their swords flourished, and the other held a pistol in his hand. On the water's edge they pulled up their horses on their haunches, and encircled the young officer. He had in his grasp the stake, a pile fit to be driven under a bridge. He swung it round like a mace, and for a minute the medley was dreadful of the crushing blows, the crash of falls, the shrieks, the oaths, and the neighs of horses. Three were hurled from their saddles, two swords were flung fifteen paces off, and the pistol imbedded in the fist of the man who had discharged it; he lay on his back in the bank, senseless. His comrades had a broken arm and a broken jaw. The victor's cheek was black with powder and his luxuriant locks were singed, but, unharmed, he stepped into the boat and with a vigorous push of the stake he sent it off into the flood.

When the rest of the ruffians reached the verge, the boat was out of reach. Walton and Braun foamed at the mouth with ire. The former urged his horse into the water as if to swim it after the fugitives; and shook his cane at the Son of Porthos, as he rode in the stirrups, yelling:

"Ah, you dog!"

At this insult, Joel's temper was ruffled, and snatching a pistol from his belt, he fired at the speaker. But

at that moment, the horse floundered in a mudhole and Walton's head was at a lower level. It was Braun who received the large bullet in the chest and he staggered back and slowly slipped down out of the saddle.

"Have a care," said one of the party to Walton: "The river is treacherous—if your horse loses footing in the deeper places, you——"

The scoundrel did not hear: wild with anger, and with a bloodshot eye and a quivering lip, he hissed:

"They are escaping—no, they shall not escape!"

The second shot from Joel grazed his hair as clean as though scissors had clipped it, and left a red seam across his temple. The pain only maddened him and he roared:

"You have your muskets. Fire on them, comrades!"

The boat was now slowly leaving the bank as the rapid current was full of eddies, and it went badly in spite of Joel, laying down his empty pistol and taking the pole to assist the old man in punting.

The robbers hastened to unhook their guns from the saddlehorns.

"Lie down," commanded Joel to the woman while he placed himself like a bulwark to the boatman. Thus they awaited the discharge of about half the battery already in position.

Six or seven shots were fired, and the bullets whizzed around the boat; the old man looked back, but at this a whirl swung the boat so that he was left uncovered by Joel, and a straggling bullet pierced his brain by the ear, after grazing the Breton. The unfortunate man lost his balance and fell over the low side, still convulsively clutching the pole. The loss was hailed by a shout of coarse exultation by the rude soldiers on the shore, and those who had not fired, levelled to obey Walton's order. He on his horse was swimming in the wake of the boat, of which Joel took both oars to try to navigate it across the channel.

"Down, down!" cried he to Therese, who had lifted her head, but the caution came too late.

"Aim low," Walton shouted, hoping that the boat would be injured if no one in it were hit: and most of the missiles flew along the surface of the stream.

Again the volley was followed by a straggling shot or two, and the woman, who had thought that the general discharge was all to be feared and who rose a little to make sure that her defender was uninjured, was struck: she rolled in the bottom of the boat, murmuring:

"Lord, have mercy on me—have pity on the daughter of Therese Lesage—and La Voisin!"

What deepened her pain was to see the stalwart form of the chevalier reel like a tree to the trunk of which an axe had been vigorously laid: he let the oars drop, but inside the gunwale, and was soon extended across the thwarts without a tremor.

"Hussa!" laughed Walton, who had fallen into the current and was being sped towards the boat, itself turning round and round on its centre in a whirlpool. "Cease firing, or you will hit me—I can finish them now."

But again the tide played a trick: one current caught the boat and spun it towards the opposite bank at good speed which made the next shots unlikely to fall true: besides, the same carried Walton and his horse into the line of fire.

The dawn had fully come, and the objects began to be defined as the mists rolled away.

The sham Englishman laughed as he beat his horse to swim more fleetly. Then, shifting the cane into his left hand, he extended the other to seize the gunwale of the boat: he gloated on the splashes of blood, on the pale and still figure of the woman and on the huge body of the Breton, who had baffled his schemes. All his triumph was in hand's reach, indeed.

"I have them," he called out.

At the same moment his exhausted horse failed him, and as he felt it sinking from between his legs he grasped the edge of the boat with both hands: the cane fell within the side. To his horror, Joel rose with a turn upon his knees and made his hands encircle his throat with a grip impossible for a man thrice his strength to disengage.

"Say your last prayer," said the Breton, "the French dog gives a deadly bite!"

Then rising, he held up the strangled adventurer in clear view of his friends on the opposite bank and contemptuously hurled him into the stream in their direction. A shower of bullets played ducks and drakes on the surface about him, but he was out of range. In another instant the boat came to a stop, in shoals by the edge. Joel lifted the motionless body of the woman in his arms and bounded to the shore.

He was climbing the ridge when a body of armed men appeared on horses and with muskets ready for use.

"Who goes there?" was the challenge.

It was a French sentry.

"France!" replied our hero.

"Lower arms and advance!"

As the bearer of Therese obeyed, the sun rose behind the forest, the whole scene was suddenly illumined, and a flood of exclamations broke out on both sides:

"What a meeting!—The Breton of St. Fiacre's Oak!—the adversary of our Corporal Bregy!"

"What a providential chance," said Joel, no less astonished. "My musketeers of St. Germain Forest—Messieurs de Gace, Escrivaux, Hericourt and Champagnac."

The chevaliers poured question upon question on him:

"Where do you come from, in this dress, and loaded with this blood-sprinkled corpse?"

"Gentlemen, I will explain all," rejoined the young

knight, "but let us think of this unfortunate woman now. In heaven's name help her to what she needs—shelter, a bed and succour!"

"Hump," coughed the old officer commanding the patrol, "it is my opinion that the sufferer has more call for a priest than a doctor, but, never mind, let us do what we can. Those gentlemen may help you carry her to the first house on the road to camp, while I attend to this knot of queer-looking gentry on the other bank."

With the oars of the boat a litter was improvised, and wrapped in a horseman's cloak, the woman was carried to a farm-house. Meanwhile the rioters had decamped on seeing the armed force. They had no wish to stop under fire to search for the body of Walton, which had probably sunk to rise no more.

The farmer's wife undressed the woman and put her to bed. Temporary dressing was applied with lint and bandages, but the wound left little hope: the projectile had gone clean through the body. On her sniffing vinegar and rubbing her temples with it, she appeared to show some signs of life. A slight colour came to her cheeks, while her lips moved and her eyes opened. She cast a dim look around her, vacillating and without brightness.

Joel, who had not quitted her, leant over her.

"Do you know me?" he inquired.

The gaze brightened in token of recognition.

"Can you hear and understand me?" he further questioned.

The eyes made the same response: and he turned to the bystanders, saying: "Leave me alone for a little while, as I must speak to her."

Every one went out, leaving the two alone; he holding one of her cold hands in his.

"So you are the daughter of Pierre Lesage and La Voisin?"

"Yes," she nodded, ashamed, and using a voice

scarcely above a breath. "I horrify you, do I not?" she said with an effort.

"I have been looking for you, my poor Therese, in order to hand you this object," and he drew the locket from his bosom and presented it to her. Her eyes dilated with astonishment as she recognised the memento from prisoner 141.

"Yes, I know this locket—it belonged to my father. How did it come into your possession?"

"I had it from the rightful owner—Pierre Lesage——"

"You have seen him?" she faintly screamed.

"I have both seen and spoken to him, in the Bastille——"

"Was he detained there? I thought it was in Vincennes Castle. Good heavens! is he imprisoned there?"

"He has already left it—more than six weeks ago, he died."

He related his meeting with his fellow-prisoner and how he had a doubt about the sincerity of the provision of means to escape which he owed to Walton.

"The villain—how right I was to leave him. He alone escaped the sudden doom of the transgressor."

"Not so: he was—drowned in the river," said Joel.

"All have gone to the other world," muttered the woman, "after their strange destinies here. How will the heavenly Judge receive my father and my mother? How will their daughter be received?"

She repulsed the locket.

"Keep it," said she. "It is a talisman, which will bring to the bearer who knows how to use it, all that human ambition can desire: riches, credit, honours, and power! it is a letter which proves what I affirmed to you in the boatman's hut, but which you refused to believe. In this the Marchioness de Montespan, furious at the king casting her off in favour of La Fontanges, asks Pierre Lesage and La Voisin for poison

with which to rid herself of her rival and revenge herself upon her lover. This confession is complete and signed. She must have been love-sick to have made such an avowal, monstrous imprudence! but is it not written that they whom heaven would destroy it first renders mad? However that may be, that scrawl, placed under King Louis' eyes, may send the proud marchioness into Lesage's prison or to the scaffold! Either he or she will buy it at any price, for though the sovereign escaped, poor Fontanges lies in the grave. From one or the other, you see, the holder is sure to obtain whatever he likes to demand. I give you this paper and the locket.'

"To me?"

"To him who witnesses my last moments, as you witnessed the death of my poor father."

"What would you have me do with it? I am not of the school of the Montespons. Besides, she has left the court in disgrace."

Something like a smile flitted over the dying one's lips.

"Oh, chevalier, it is plain that you are a novice in court matters! A favourite never falls so low that she may not on the wings of evil soar to the point whence she fell. Often she seemed to have lost her power, but each time she retook her place and marked her return with revenge."

"But I hardly more than know your marchioness!" returned Joel with animation. "I am neither her liege nor her enemy. Why should I be armed against her?"

The woman raised upon him eyes in which were the dark depths of the eternal night. With a tone that seemed like that of another world, she said:

"The veil over the future is drawn aside for those about to die; and moreover, I have the gift of second sight. I see that you must struggle with that woman for your dear one——"

Joel started, for a vision of Aurore rushed across his brain, and his heart felt a pang.

"Keep the locket—preserve it for her guard—to save her!" persisted Therese in a weakening voice.

"And as a present from me, who would have loved you with all her soul—had you been free and I not unworthy of you!"

As though ashamed of the avowal escaping her she seized the sheets with both hands and tried to cover her face; but her arms relaxed and then stiffened. The linen fell, and her eyes closed as the door opened to admit the doctor who had been sent for. He looked for a moment on the white face, idealised by death to the extreme of human beauty, and taking off his hat with a grave movement, he said:

"This woman is dead."

CHAPTER XXVII

TO WIN A WIFE

ON account of its peculiar position the town of Freiburg was a difficult place for an army to invest, and sorely troubled the rough and fierce captain who beleaguered it, when Ensign Joel de Locmaria arrived at last before it.

His new friends had accompanied him as mourners when Therese Lesage was borne to her grave in Alt-Brisach cemetery, leave having been granted by their captain of light horse, M. de la Berange, although every man was required in the trenches. On their reaching Waldau, they found that Marshal Créquy had left his headquarters for a reconnaissance in force, and they persuaded Joel to await his return.

As they approached the trenches freshly dug before the Herdern suburb, they saw a tumult among the

soldiers: light cavalry men had alighted, tied up their horses and surrounded a group of officers whom they were threatening with voice and fist. The friends of Joel rode up with him, also dismounted and hitched their horses, and ran up.

"How now?" they inquired.

"It is the marshal," said a horseman. "He is making fools of us. Not content with using us as foot-soldiers, he wants us to go into the trenches and use the pick and spade like sappers and miners."

In the midst of the riot Captain Berange's voice arose, addressed to some one whom the Breton could not perceive. "You see, sir," he said, "that my soldiers refuse to lend a hand in such dirty work. I will try to dissuade the marshal from accepting it—in the meantime, pray seek the sappers and miners somewhere else."

"But I tell you again, captain," replied another voice, "that Major-general Basset of the Artillery has given me orders to take fifty of your men to help finish this trench and mount my mortars—and by all the gods! take them I will? though I have to take them by force to the work."

"I beg to ask you to try nothing of the sort, as my men are very excited and they may forget the rules of the service."

"What is this?" muttered the Breton, "do my ears deceive me? I seem to have heard that captious voice before—and that style of carrying all before him!"

Meanwhile the officer, picking out one of the light horsemen, said:

"I say, you with your elongated body, begin by taking the mattock and set an example to your comrades."

The person addressed did not move.

"Did you not hear me?"

"I heard you very well."

"Obey then, or——"

"I obey only my own officers, gentlemen who wear my uniform, and who measure more than a span from the crown to the sole!"

There was general laughter and the officer grew more angry.

"You rascal!" he said.

"Gently, gently, Master Bombardier," returned the cavalryman jokingly, "Do not rush at me like that—you might stumble into the funnel-tops of your boots and it would be the devil's own work to find you again!"

The hilarity increased, and the exasperated bombardier called out:

"Sergeant Bonlarron!"

"Here," and a tall old fellow in a steel cap scrambled out of the trench.

"Sergeant, take hold of this little bit of exaggerated importance for a light horseman—the one who is laughing so loudly—and take him to the provost-marshal to be punished."

"Very well, sir!" and the tall soldier strode towards the horseman referred to: but when he stretched out his hand to seize him, he drew back and laid his hand on his sword, growling:

"Mind what you are about! don't dare to lay a finger on me!"

"Beware, sir," said Berange, "I warned you that my men will not allow their comrade to be pulled about."

"Not by a manikin!"

"Manikin! these insults are intolerable. Here, my bombardiers."

The gunners darted out of the trench, brandishing their digging implements.

"Sir, I shall hold you responsible for any bloodshed," said the cavalry officer.

"And I shall hold you responsible for the disobedi-

ence and insolence of your soldiers—mutineers whom I shall chastise—hang, draw and quarter for their abuse. At them, my lads, and well flog the foul-mouths!" He whipped out his sword, in which act he was imitated by his sergeant and men.

"Come, come," muttered Joel, "it is high time that a cool head intervened."

He plunged into the riot and appeared among the flashing blades, picks and spades raised in attack and defence.

"My friend Joel!"

So cried the bombardier captain and his sergeant, whom the Breton cordially saluted.

"But put up your swords! I must say that you are both wrong. You in the first place, my comrade," he went on to Friquet, "with such bullying, imperious and aggressive manners in asking even for a proper thing that one is always tempted to send you to the deuce with your quarrelsome temper. Hang it all! it is not the fault of his majesty's lighthorse-soldiers, that they should stand head and shoulder above you. Pass by this unaccountable superiority and comfort yourself with the old proverb that the best things are done up in the smallest packets."

"There is no doubt about that," grumbled the pigmy, sheathing his rapier, "and the ladies always give preference to the neat, little, dapper gallants who never attain the bulk of your Olympian Jupiters."

Joel had turned to Berange and said: "Captain, with all due respect allow me to observe that it would have been handsomer of you to carry out the king's orders, for you are no less his man because you have a horse between your legs. What are we all sent here for but to take Freiburg: and to do so, a blow with the pick is as good as a cut of the sword. There is as much honour in being shot in the trenches as in galloping across the field."

Suddenly, as though to give point to the speech, a

puff of white smoke rose on one of the bastions of the stronghold. A cannon shot resounded, and the ball buried itself in one of the sandbags covering the bank of the trench. The bag burst and Joel disappeared in a shower of dirt: emerging and dusting himself, he said calmly: "Now you will see the necessity of this work."

A second explosion was heard, and this time it was followed by a cry, for a splash of blood half covered the speaker: the besieged had improved on their aim at the crowd, and the ball had struck Captain Berange in the chest. A terrible clamour arose from the men in dread as the captain expired. Champagnac threw a cloak over him, while the rest looked on in silence, pale and awed.

"Had the front of that trench been opened," said our hero coldly, "that brave man would still be alive."

Without further ado, he picked up a spade and set to work. The others followed his good example; officers and privates ran for tools and all got into working order. A furious cannonade from the enemy did not damp this ardour, so that by nightfall the cutting was a fit lodgment and strongly occupied.

"'Sblood!" exclaimed Friquet, as he and Bonlarron felicitated Joel, "this is fabulous and stupefying! to renew old acquaintance under the enemy's cannon fire! Oh, my valiant, faithful Joel!"

"But just think of it," went on the sergeant, "he sports the uniform of our regiment—with the officer's insignia—he must be the ensign we were expecting to see!"

There was mutual explanation. Bonlarron had sold out by reason of the police having plagued the "Blackamoor" since the substitution of Friquet for the duellist, and he had enlisted under the flag of the new corps of bombardiers which Friquet had the appointment to command.

"As for you—we can see that you have found your sire, and the happy Porthos has procured his son a grade suitable to his birth and rank——"

Joel felt his heart smart as if burning, and a hot flush mounted to his cheek as he stammered in confusion:

"No, it is not as you suppose—I have not had that great good fortune——"

His embarrassment was interrupted by Captain Friquet being called away by the major-general of the artillery. Silence and rest reigned over the camp and town at night. In the outposts nobody was awake save the sentinels and Joel. He could not sleep from the remorse which Friquet's words had aroused in his bosom. Was he acting right in what he was doing? conscience answered no! He had not quitted his native place to be a happy man; to win the love of Aurore and marry her for a life of peace, no more than to lead one of war: but to seek out the unknown. On her death-bed his mother had imposed this task upon him, and he had promised to devote his life to it. He said to himself that he should not have acquired the right to enjoy his bliss until he found it impossible to ascertain the fate of the companion of Athos, Aramis and D'Artagnan. His resolution was taken in a minute. He would lay the case before Marshal Créquy, who would no doubt excuse him from passing his time at a siege which was a work of time in those days. He would go back to Paris and apply to that old man of such experience and wisdom, the Duke of Almada. Surely he would suggest the means for the young man to recommence and carry on his investigation.

Having debated and settled within himself, he was tranquillised and could slumber, awaiting the morrow. He was right at first in his conjectures for, on reading the despatches, the general gave the bearer a kindly glance. Unfortunately there was a postscript to the paper which made the veteran start.

He read it again with deliberation, like one who has a cipher despatch under his eye and fears he is missing some hidden meaning. At intervals he observed that Joel was preparing to utter his petition to be sent back to the capital.

"Chevalier," said the marshal, "the king requests me to keep you by me to the end of the campaign and to give you a chance to distinguish yourself. You have commenced very well by bringing your messages through, over a very dangerous route. Still I shall conform to his majesty's desires, as he wants you to return to the ladies of the court with honour."

Alas! all the young officer's hopes were blown to the winds. He could not think of quitting the army, as the king had written to the contrary and he must obey.

"In the meantime," said Créquy, "if I can do anything special for you——"

"Forsooth, general, I have a great favour to solicit of your bounty; but I think it would be unreasonable for me to mention it just now, and I shall content myself by doing my duty in the company to which his majesty has appointed me ensign."

"The new cannoneers, I believe! I will recommend you to the captain——"

"Captain Friquet and I are old friends—we once met in a duel. But all I wanted was a piece of information, a clue to the length of the campaign and if I dared to ask on what it depends——"

Créquy stretched out his hand towards the town, saying:

"Yonder is the end of the campaign. That is the place from which Duke Charles reckons to swoop to tear Lorraine from us; that imperial fortress is the sword of Damocles, impending over our Alsace—his foothold when he springs forward to attack, his rest when he wants to recruit, his line of retreat in case of defeat. Freiburg taken, we have the key to Vienna in our grasp: the hopes of the Lorraine Prince ruined;

the proof to the Emperor Leopold of the rashness and invalidity of his plighted brother-in-law's enterprises against France and a preliminary to his repudiation of him. That is why I am bound to take Freiburg," he concluded, after a pause.

"And why not at once," cried Joel, with resolution.

"Young man, you are too hasty," said the old war-dog, "it is well to be brave but one must take heed not to be presumptuous. Do you not see that citadel en-crusted in the mountain—the Castle. Do you talk of taking that, without my having hippogriffs on which to mount you young gentlemen? I could possibly reach that point with the loss of half my men—but, then, there would be that fort to face! a garrison to subdue and the population who would fight behind the walls and use against us fire, stone, water and iron! No, no, that will not do! let us be patient, and play the rabbit, with sap and mine! When the breach is open, your old general will show you the way."

"I see," thought the young ensign, "since it is to be a duel at long shots, I will jog Friquet to hurry up matters, otherwise——"

"What would happen otherwise?" questioned the marshal, who had overheard the monologue.

"Well, I shall have to take the citadel myself," rejoined the Son of Porthos without hesitation.

"What!" and the old marshal joined in the laugh of the aide-de-camps and the officers: "go ahead then, my boy, and do not wait for me. If you have an idea, you may have the means to put it into execution. I authorise you to make a sublime madman of yourself."

"Have you come into a fortune!" said Friquet when the new officer returned radiant from his visit to the commander-in-chief.

"Yes, I shall soon be going to win my wife!" replied the Son of Porthos with gladness and fervent belief.

CHAPTER XXVIII

JOEL'S SUGGESTION

THE wily old governor Schultz of Freiburg ate and drank heartily but he slept with one eye open. He was sheltered behind thick walls; he had a good stock of provisions; more guns than were set against him and munitions to spare. The townspeople were devoted to the emperor; Duke Charles had promised to come to his relief, and the prince had never been known to fail. From all these reasons the corpulent colonel had been but slightly uneasy about the investment of the place. But he kept up a good guard, and he ceased not to pound away at the entrenchments advancing towards him. He was going to begin a meal when an orderly announced the arrival of an extraordinary messenger from the Duke of Lorraine. This news made him swallow some of a glass of Moselle the wrong way.

"A messenger from Prince Charles?" he repeated; "how could he get to us? Surely the enemy would not let him penetrate their lines at his ease."

"Colonel," said an officer, "we observed him running towards us, pursued by the shots of the French and our pickets treated him in a similar manner but he stood the double fire grandly, and jumped into our moat, shouting: '*Friend!*' so that I cast him a rope and he hauled himself up on the rampart. He is now in the guard-house drying himself as you may expect after a bath of that sort."

"What is he?"

"Not a Frenchman—more like a Saxon—a giant of a fellow. It is my opinion that they could have caught him if they had tried, but none of them had the courage to get near enough to him."

"Let him be brought before me at once. I will

interrogate him while taking a bite: and if anything double-faced appears in his tale—" He snapped off the end of a sausage between his stumpy teeth with ferocity of ill omen.

A short time afterwards, the personage announced was escorted into his presence between four imperial musketeers, tall fellows whom, however, he towered above by half a head. He had black moustaches streaked with grey, strongly outlined creases on the face as from age and a hard life in military harness, but an eye of inextinguishable youth. In this one feature alone would Aurore herself have recognised her lover, whose disguise was the work of art of the hair-dresser of the young Duke de Villars, who had associated himself with our hero in this enterprise. Needless to say that the cane of Walton, picked up by the patrol and brought to Joel, had reminded him of his idea and furnished a means to commence it auspiciously.

"Do you belong to Germany?" brusquely demanded Colonel Schultz.

"No, colonel, I am a native of Lorraine."

"You say you are charged with a mission from Prince Charles?"

With the assistance of a soldier who used his bayonet as a knife, he extracted from a seam of his coat a paper which was nothing else than the note confided to Walton by Duke Charles. The governor read it over twice and carefully examined it.

"Well, it seems right enough: it is my lord's memorandum-paper, marked with his cypher."

The genuineness of the note was not questioned, but he had still a lingering mistrust as he inquired: "How did you get through the enemy's lines?"

"I went into the marshal's camp under pretence of selling cherry brandy of my own make, out of a cask I had in a cart. Watching my opportunity I slipped into the trench. Unfortunately," with a rough laugh, "my height betrayed me among those midgets of

French in the ditches and the hue and cry was raised. I jumped out and ran for your works. The rest happened under the eyes of your men and they can tell you all about it. I am glad that they do not shoot as straight at your friends as they should at the enemy to repulse them."

Schultz drew a wry face.

"What are you bringing me—news?"

"Instructions for my lord, private, precise and confidential."

"Verbal, do you mean?"

"I should say so! what I carried in my vest was enough to have me hanged—but the duke would not allow his liege to carry, save in his head, the plan by the means of which Freiburg is to be delivered in three days."

He pointed to the soldiers, whom Schultz dismissed with a jerk of the thumb.

"Now tell me all," he said when they were alone.

"I will listen while I eat—my breakfast is my heartiest meal."

Word for word the mock Lorrainer repeated what he had heard Walton and the general arrange in the inn garden. The colonel approved as he laid it open.

"That is good!" he said, smacking his tongue. "A rocket as the signal—that was better! the double attack at one time—the prince and his troops on the one hand, and I, with the garrison and the people on the other. Ah, Créquy and his men will not be able to stand that, ha, ha!" He crushed the wing of a fowl between his ponderous jaws, coming together like a portcullis.

"By the way, comrade," he added, eyeing the jolly old Lorrainer who was still echoing his laugh, "do you chance to guess what was in that note about you?"

"I think so," said Joel tranquilly, with the grim merriment of a peasant, "my lord advised you to put a bullet through my head or hang me with a new rope if anything in my behaviour struck your excellency as

suspicious." And he laughed again, as though this doubt of him were the cream of good things.

"Oh, you know all about it, do you?" and he snapped his piggish eyes on each side of his high-coloured and fleshy nose.

"His highness kindly read the lines out to me with stress on those concerning myself."

"Then remember," said the colonel, thumping the board with his fist, "that Colonel Schultz has never broken his word. And may the thunder-weather crush me if I do not carry out the duke's orders, though I have to blow your brains out with my own hand or wind the noose round your neck."

"Pshaw!" returned Joel with the same serenity, "there is a plain way of making sure that I walk straight in doing my duty to my prince and my country—keep me by you so that you can read my very thoughts——"

The colonel caught the ball on the bound, so to say.

"Just so! the very thing I had decided upon. From this moment my watch over you will not be taken off, and you will be riveted to me as the shadow to the body."

The pseudo envoy of Prince Charles gravely said: "I am glad to become, if only for a while, the shadow of the eminent warrior, Colonel Schultz, whose prudence, valour, and military science are a household word among the soldiers of Europe."

This blunt flattery operated a fresh change in the colonel. His face showed amiability in the highest degree.

"I like you," he said with gruff good-humour. "In fact, we are old war-dogs together—about the same age, I judge. What grade did you hold in the army?"

"I have long retired to cultivate the patch of pine woods I wrested from the forest—but I was a sergeant in the Vaudemont regiment when we fought at Rocroy

for the right cause. Only," with another broad guffaw, "the right cause was beaten that day. Mein Gott! how our allies the Spaniards were thrashed—by that greenhorn the Duke of Enghien!"

Colonel Schultz joined in the laugh.

"What did you say your name was?"

"Nikolas Hummer, at your orders."

"Well, *Major* Hummer," said Shultz, holding out his hand, "Not only will you accompany me when I go forth on the requirements of duty, but you shall share my board, and sleep in the inner room of my own bedchamber. I will see that you fare well. Can you eat well—can you drink?"

"Yes!" responded Joel, who never felt anywhere more at home than when this proposition was put, and opening his mouth to show a set of teeth, which, spite of his assumed age, seemed fit to devour a wild boar at three sittings.

The governor appeared enchanted with his guest, who not only was his shadow, as has been well said, in his round on the rampart, and in the inspection of the barracks and the works, to say nothing of the mines, including the famous one which was to overwhelm the French if they made a grand assault, but at his copious banquets.

All Freiburg feasted likewise. The people had wind of the approaching deliverance, though there was no suspicious babbling of the plan from the pretended envoy. They made preparations to receive the prince when the French should have been driven away.

The governor's suite of apartments was on the ground floor, an old guard-room converted for his pleasure: in spite of the low, vaulted ceiling, short columns supporting it, and the dark walls covered with armour and trophies, it was gay when the two carousing companions, as Joel and the colonel had become, entered on the second dozen bottles of wine.

The clock was striking nine from the cathedral tower

when an officer intruded on them to get the word and countersign. Herr Schultz raised his inflamed, puffed and mottled face and made a beckoning sign for the officer to stoop to have the word whispered to him. But he forgot to alter his voice to the proper key and almost roared in his subordinate's ear: "*Vater-land*,—did you catch it?"

"I did, governor," said the officer, departing.

Another officer succeeded him who brought a bunch of keys to his superior, as was the usage, every evening after the bugle sounded. Not the keys of the town gates, which were locked, bolted, and barred, with the portcullis lowered, and the drawbridge hauled up since the beginning of the siege; but of the citadel, communicating with the town, as well as a grated door, preventing access to the stairs leading up to the castle roof. On receiving them and stuffing them into his pocket, Schultz asked if he had any news.

"No, colonel: the night is as black as the muzzle of an uncleaned gun, and rain is falling fast."

"So much the better for the watchers," said the head officer with a loud laugh: "those creatures of Créquy's will not venture forth for fear of taking the curl out of their feathers and the starch out of their lace. Go and get to bed," he added to the two soldiers who had brought in the meal, as soon as the officers had retired. "We do not want you to pull the caps off these ladies—" alluding to the sealed bottles. "When I drink, I do not like folks watching me to count how many glasses I have."

The soldiers obeyed.

"Now it goes between ourselves, dear Major Hummer! Much as I hate the men of France, so much I love their wines. There they stand—off with their heads, jolly fellow! down with the wines of France!" Taking a bottle he wrenched out the cork and began to fill the two glasses.

"Let us drink," said Joel, knocking off two necks

of bottles, one held in each hand, against another with the dexterity of a juggler.

So they went on; to the mild wines succeeded the heavy ones: and the liquors followed. They sang while they drank, and to Schultz's muffled ears, the Breton ballad was good enough Lorraine dialect to excite no comment. Soon, though, the musical notes were merged into snores. Both guests appeared asleep, but at the end of twenty minutes as the church bell struck eleven, one of the drowsy ones made a move. It was "Major Nikolas Hummer," who lifted his head warily and let his eyes wander to find Colonel Schultz. The host was leaning back in his arm-chair, letting sound rumble through his immeasurably opened mouth which defied the trombone to imitate. He was deeply wrapped in a heavy sleep. The Frenchman scanned him, without any tokens of drunkenness on his part.

"To think of his expecting to intoxicate me with the wines of my own country!" Listening to the church bells striking after that of the cathedral which had given the cue, he said: "I have just an hour before me. More than I want."

Schultz snored more loudly than ever, and with his bare throat, a sanguinary enemy might have been tempted to spoil his gullet for wine-bibbing: but Joel shook his head.

"All I want is the bunch of keys," he said: "and they are there." The keys stuck out the governor's pocket, but were not easily extracted, though Joel accomplished it, as he was not pressed for time. He also borrowed the governor's hat with a black and yellow feather and his gold-laced mantle, from the chair where they had been flung, and arrayed himself in them. He took down a sword from the wall pegs, and left the room.

The vestibule led him into a gallery, where he was stopped by a grating across the way to a spiral staircase.

One of the abstracted keys opened the lock of this grating, and our hero entered on the stairs. The chief defence of the *Schloss* was the principal tower roof, over two hundred feet above the moat; it communicated with the town by a very narrow way. While all the troops were placed at points along the circumvallation, one battalion of the imperial regiment was located in the tower. It was not likely that the enemy would attack a part said to be impregnable, and to reach which the whole of the fire from elsewhere would have to be endured. Still there stood on the tower-top six heavy pivot-guns which could be turned against the town, once the castle was captured. In a stone watchbox on the roof was a sentinel who could survey the country roundabout. Here also Schultz had posted a squad of twenty men, under an ensign who was charged to watch the French.

Where the stairs came out on the platform a sentry was walking up and down.

"*Wer da?* who is there?" he challenged, as he heard steps coming up, stopping and lowering his bayonet.

Joel had not neglected his recent opportunity, in accompanying Herr Schultz on service, to acquire at least many phrases of military German.

"Officer going his round," replied he, in a deep voice worthy of his stature.

The slouch hat concealed his face, and the cloak mantled his shape. He stooped a little as he went up to the man and said:

"*Vater!*" to which the soldier replied, "*Land!*" as he raised his musket to the present.

"Soldier," said Joel abruptly, "who posted you here?"

"The officer," and without rejoinder, the soldier let the pretended officer go by while he descended the stairs.

The rain began to fall in torrents, it was very cold and the wind blew a gale. In the wooden shelter serv-

ing as a guardhouse, the officer and his men were sleeping on the plank-bed. In his watchbox the special lookout was dozing, but on hearing the new-comer, he peered out. Thinking he knew the person by the hat and cloak, he let the false Schultz come up.

"Vater——"

As the German was about to return the password, Joel's hands fell upon his throat and his waistbelt: he dragged the wretch bodily out of the box and hurled him over the battlements. His strangled shriek was indistinguishable among the many curious noises made by the wind around the stone parapets.

"One the less," muttered he, "I hope, though, that he has not fallen on any of our boys!"

He alluded to his friends whom he had arranged to meet him on the main tower at midnight.

"There was no alternative. Besides, it is one way of letting them know that I am at work."

The bells began to ring for twelve o'clock.

He hid behind the watchbox, and through the loophole in the wall lowered a rope, which he had worn coiled around him under his clothes, and which had given him the roundness of corporation which had excited Schultz's fellow-feeling for a lover of good cheer.

With a loose stone tied to the end, this rope slowly descended: but after a while Joel felt the weight removed; then a shake was given, and as he drew it upwards he found that another and increasing load had been attached.

"A rope-ladder," he thought, tugging at the burden which few men could have pulled so far, but he "walked" it along, hand over hand, like a sailor. At length he had the end in hand, to which a bar of iron was bound crosswise. This bar he placed within the battlements so that it would not slip and shook the rope. Bending over, he soon observed a string of shadows ascending, and with the reckless levity of the

old soldiers, whose manners he was prompt to adopt with the imitativeness of youth, he muttered:

"Passengers for heaven, this way!"

In about fifteen minutes he had the majority of the thirty men, under Friquet and Bonlarron, around him.

"Now," he said, pointing to the guardhouse, "Make sure of the fellows in that shed. They are asleep, so you need not make any noise, but simply bind them with their belts and gag them with their pompons. Do not fire a shot, whatever you do."

The little party, shod with strips of blankets over their boots, proceeded to the spot. The ensign was aroused, but Joel caught him in the left hand as he recoiled from his column of silent phantoms, and pointing the sword at his eyes, said:

"Not a word or you die!"

The officer saw that the wisest course was to obey, so he remained flattened against the wall like an owl nailed to a barn-door.

"Only a sentry on the stairs is left. I will see to him. Reverse the guns." And Joel descended the tower steps. A few minutes after, they saw him reappear, carrying under his arm the soldier who had been given no time to snap the trigger at him.

Meanwhile, the six pivot-guns were turned round to bear on the town, and threaten it with a torrent of flame and iron.

Joel looked round with a proud and gladdened eye.

"Up with our flag," said he.

They now conducted the water from the tank where it was stored against fire, to the receptacle for the great mine, which was inundated during the hours before dawn.

Great was the joy in the French camp, and equal that of another kind, of the town, in the morning, when the white standard with the gold lily-flowers was seen waving in the sun over the main tower of the citadel.

As a signal to their friends, the French fired one of

the guns trained upon the town, and the ball decapitated one of the statues in front of the cathedral: the town was at the mercy of the party who held the tower-top:

"The French—the French advance!" was the cry, as they saw the army of the marshal leaving his lines in three columns. But before they came under fire, a sphere of iron, with side-pieces which gave it a peculiar rotary movement and an awful sound, rose from the French battery of Captain Friquet, and described a trajectory which landed it on the City Hall square, where it crushed several in the vast crowd assembled there. It was the precursor of the Little Parisian's infernal work, for three more bombs spread destruction and carnage.

Under these shooting meteors the enemy continued to advance. There was no hope of entrapping them at the undermined wall as it was discovered that the powder was swamped. On the other hand, a fourth shell exploded in the magazine, and the only thought of everybody was to escape this fire raining from heaven.

During the height of the panic Créquy sent an order to stop the bombardment, which Friquet had witnessed from the height. At nine o'clock, the French general made his entrance into the place.

He threw his arms round the Son of Porthos as the latter presented him with the keys.

"It is to you, my lad, that we owe this victory to the king's arms."

He called Friquet to him and complimented him and Bonlarron.

Here they brought to him the flags taken from the enemy: that of the imperial regiment, the Kornach and the town guards.

"Chevalier de Locmaria," resumed he, "I charge you to convey these trophies to St. Germain, to be placed at the feet of the king. I shall acquaint his

majesty with the important share you had in the capture. Captain Friquet and Sergeant Bonlarron will accompany you. Take the keys and the flags, gentlemen. I have no need to say that I am proud to command lads of mettle like yourselves, and I am your friend whenever you want one."

That same evening the three friends set out. They passed joyfully over the returning way. Everywhere the news ran before them, so that they were proclaimed as the heroes of Freiburg. Thus they were hailed at St. Dizier, where they put up at the "Cross of Lorraine" Inn, when a man ran out of the mob towards Joel.

"The chevalier!"

"Honorin!" exclaimed the knight at seeing the old serving-man of the Widow Scarron.

"I was coming after you, with this message from my mistress."

Our hero took the paper and read these two lines:

"Come home without loss of time. Aurore's life and honour are in danger.

"YOUR FRIEND."

"My horse, my horse!" he shouted. "Join me later—I must make straight for Paris, though I had to walk there—nay, drag myself on my knees. You may join me there—if I be still alive."

"But the flags?" suggested Bonlarron.

"And the king?" added the Parisian.

"'Sblood!" ejaculated the Son of Porthos, with a snap of the fingers in mighty disdain, "it matters little about kings and flags. My wife is in question. My wife, do you hear?"

He leaped into the saddle, and, getting ready to drive in the spurs, he shouted:

"Farewell! if you love me, think of me sometimes—for I know not what kind of devil I have to encounter!"

CHAPTER XXIX

THE PRICE OF SILENCE

IN the courtyards of St. Germain Palace, and on the square in front and the streets where the royal hunting party were to pass, there was a noisy affluence of people, insatiable to gaze at so many carriages, horses, plumes and golden decorations.

The brilliant assemblage paraded the town and left it by the slope which leads to the deeper parts of the forest. There were non-equivocal tokens of storm, but all the orders were given out, and the king would not postpone an engagement which concerted with a secret arrangement with the Duke of Almada. But the order was given to make all speed and the whole cavalcade dashed off at the gallop.

As soon as it had disappeared in whirls of dust, the multitude dispersed, and the good town subsided into its usual state when its mighty lords and ladies were absent—as silent, dull and deserted as at the present day.

Towards dusk, as the clouds immensely enlarged and their line of battle, outlined on the sky, borrowed some purple tints from the setting sun, which made the hue more lugubrious—the shoes of a horse ridden at the top of speed smote fire out of the courtyard paving-stones. It was the Son of Porthos, with dusty clothes, flaming countenance, hair dropping perspiration, and bloody spurs, who was stopped by the sentry at the gates, lowering his partisan to bar his way.

“Courier from Marshal Créquy,” said the Breton from the height of his saddle and his own superior stature, as he waved the Swiss guardsman aside with an imperious gesture.

The officer at the gates ran up.

"Do you come from Freiburg, sir?" he asked eagerly.

"Yes, sir, and all haste, as you may perceive."

"But his majesty is away hunting at Marly, and will probably spend the night there as usual."

"How is Mdme. de Locmaria?" demanded Joel after a frown in disappointment. "My wife, that is—one of the queen's ladies. There has been no mishap to her, I trust?"

"I have not the honour to know Mdme. de Locmaria personally; but I have not heard of any accident to any lady of the household. The queen has gone with the hunt, and takes all her attendants with her."

"Show me the road to Marly!" said Joel quickly, and on its being pointed out, he darted off in the direction indicated. Our hero thought only of Aurore, who might at that very instant be in need of his arm and his sword. He hurried onward: his saddle burned him, his steed, with sides furrowed by the rowels, neighed with pain as it whitened its bit with foam. He thus went two leagues in fifteen minutes.

Distant flourishes of the hunting-horns guided him.

Suddenly a black curtain, drawn across the path, was ripped by a blade of steel-like colour—it was the lightning—signalling the downpour of a torrent. He was in the woods, but the old trees seemed a frail defence to the shower. The horse was almost broken down by this new disaster, but the rider was invulnerable. He had taken one of the bridle-paths which seemed to lead to the centre where the horns were sounding the rally. The storm had spoilt the sport. This alley led to a clearing where ancient oaks surrounded a natural circus. At the instant when Joel's horse stopped, dead-beat, at this space, a singular party crossed it. Two of three men carried a burden which seemed to be a dead body; the third guided them: he bore a resemblance to M. de Boislaurier. By

a flash of lightning, this confused mass became defined and the cavalier recognised that the apparent corpse was a woman's. Fainted or dead—what was more to the purpose, and drew from him an outcry which was an appeal, a sob and a roar of wrath—it was his wife!

But all was oblivion. Standing up in the stirrups, Joel stretched his arms towards the vanished vision. Unfortunately, in this movement of despair and entreaty, his hand let fall the reins. Just then, another flash of lightning crossed the foliage and the thunderbolt fell on a tree which it split, with such a noise that the echoes seemed afraid for a space to repeat the roar. The frightened horse reared violently, and the unsaddled rider was thrown so that his head struck the foot of a birch tree where he remained stunned.

For some time he was left unconscious until the cold and the wet restored him. The storm was as short as it had been tremendous. He rose painfully to his feet. His intelligence triumphed, not without an effort, over his bewilderment, and one memory surged up above the whirl in his brain—that of the strangers carrying off his wife. He wished to spring off in pursuit of the wretches, catch them, tear their prey from them, if yet she lived, and kill them to a man, exacting blood for blood!

Yes: but where had they gone—where was he to begin the hunt? Time had gone on and they had a start. The Breton was unacquainted with the woods. His horse had disappeared. He went on at random, staggering as if intoxicated: his limbs were benumbed and he did not feel his heart beat.

Suddenly he beheld a light, and instantly directed his steps towards this beacon; it was burning in old ruins, thatched, dilapidated, with a door hanging by one hinge, and with a small window like a loophole. He approached the latter, and looked in, before knocking at the door, from some unaccountable reason. It

was easy to see the inside, as there was no blind or curtain, and the wind freely circulated from the absence of a pane of glass. A kind of murmur came through it, such as is made by a priest reciting prayers.

Notwithstanding the anxiety which seemed to be mastering him, Joel was deeply attracted by this singularity. He stood on the grass to deaden the sound of his spurred heels, glided up to the wall, and stretching his neck, peered into the gap with uneasy curiosity.

In the room with bare walls was a table covered with a black cloth which after a fashion resembled an altar. At each corner burnt a wax candle. On the cloth, holy books were placed exactly the reverse and contrary to their proper positions. To complete this burlesque sacrifice, a cross was placed foot upwards, with a long knife and a brass basin.

Before this mock altar stood a woman, dressed as a priest, whom Joel recognised as the hag he had met in Paris, associated with Walton in barring his way to reach Therese Lesage. Two women were making the responses in a moaning way. Still another, wearing a Spanish mantilla, stood in an expectant attitude.

The veiled woman was the Marchioness de Montespan: the two attendants who were kneeling were her maids.

At the period of the Consecration, La Bosse took the brazen bowl to raise it above her head as the priest does the chalice, but in turning it upside down, she shook out a large toad.

The marchioness stepped forward, threw aside her veil, and appeared like Medea, with a deep and feverish eye, the tresses of her purple hair winding among a crown of vervain, ivy sprays from graves and the violets of death. The toad was hopping upon the altar as she caught up the knife and with one sharp stroke killed the unclean animal. The glutinous blood daubed her patrician hands:

"By this offering," said she in a strong, grave voice, "I ask for the love of the king to return to me and to remain ever mine; for my obtaining from him all I want for myself and my kin; for my friends and servants to be cherished by him; myself respected by the lords, whom I may call into the councils of his majesty, and who are to let me know what occurs there: in short, that his love shall grow above what it was in the past. Let Louis cast off this execrable Aurore as he did Louise de la Vallière, and let me marry Louis when he repudiates his queen or she dies!"

"Madame," said La Bosse, "it is time to proceed to the evocation."

The lady turned her back to the altar. Her hair twisted as though serpents were writhing in it and gave her forehead the aspect of the Omenides. With trembling lips, and panting bosom, she called out three times:

"Satan! Satan! Satan!"

But the last syllable was almost lost in a terrible shriek from herself and her attendants.

The door was thrown open with violence, and a tall figure whose proportions were exaggerated by the dubious moonbeams, stood, silent but threatening on the threshold. The lady and the maid-servants flung themselves down with their faces to the ground.

Had the demon of Darkness responded to the impious request?

The figure advanced; with a wave of the hand he dismissed the minor sacrilegists, and the wretches did not ask him to repeat the stern: "Begone!" They scrambled to their feet and rushed out into the forest like three owls hurrying to their nests.

The intruder strode up to the marchioness, and stopping before her and folding his arms on his breast, he said:

"Woman, what have you done with my wife, Aurore?"

The lady stared at him in stupor and drawing back her head to shun the power of his eyes, she murmured:

"Is this his spirit? do the dead come to life? or has Satan taken his shape to manifest himself?"

He grasped her waist roughly.

"Madame," said he, "no prevarication or trickery. I am here. Answer me promptly. Minutes are precious in such an emergency. What have you done with my wife?"

By his grasp the royal favourite felt that she was not dealing with a phantom and her courage came back, so that she tried to combat.

"What you are talking about I cannot understand," she replied.

"You lie!" retorted Joel. "You mentioned my name just now in your abominable practice of sorcery. I saw two men in your hire, no doubt, not long ago, carrying her in a swoon through the forest. By all that is holy, you will tell me without delay, or——"

"Would you harm a woman?" sneered Athenais in bravado.

"Well, no, I will leave the executioner to do that!"

"The executioner?"

"Is it not he who will deal out justice to the poisoner?"

"I say to you now that *you* lie!"

"Mademoiselle de Fontanges stood in the way of your ambition, and you were the cause of her death: I hold the proof in this locket, enclosing your own death warrant, your order for the poison of Pierre Lesage."

At sight of the trinket she recoiled.

"Madame," he said coldly, "let me tell you that, in my country, I once strangled with these hands a wolf that sprang upon me. Now, let us finish this. Tell me where my wife is and I will give you impunity by restoring to you this paper. If you hold your tongue, I swear to God that I will with my own hand place this

before the king to-morrow, after having shouted out the story so loudly and widely over Paris that all the world, nobles and people, will demand that the special tribunal shall send you into Lesage's dungeon until they light the fire again which consumed La Voisin to ashes!"

"But I have had no hand in Mdme. de Locmaria being abducted. Go and ask the Spanish ambassador for her, who in this matter is rather the agent of our king—he wishes to make her the mistress of the king."

"My patron—the king—where is the king—where is Almada—where is Aurore?"

"They are probably in the Château of Marly. The lady fell ill during the hunt, and the duke ordered her to be carried to a summer-house he owns near the château."

"Enough!" interrupted Joel. "I know all that you could tell me."

He remembered the dying words of Esteban, and as he recalled the details he recovered his self-possession.

"The road to this summer-house?"

"The path by those rocks—in twenty minutes——"

"I thank you!"

He tore from his neck and flung down the medallion, saying: "You see I keep my word, madame."

He drew his sword and he marched forth without heeding the marchioness. He went at a good pace, firm yet quick, and as he shook his locks as the lion does his mane, he might be heard to say:

"We three will fight this out—I, the king and the duke!"

CHAPTER XXX

DEATH OF ARAMIS

WE will now leave the king and his courtiers supping at Marly, around a small table which was improvised for the accommodation of himself and a select few. Here the company discussed the little incident which broke up the festivities and interrupted the business of the hunting party.

We will now enter the private apartments which were prohibited to the frequenters of the palace. In this sanctuary the king ceased to be anything more than mortal.

Here we shall find Aurore again. At the picnic on the turf, which had preceded the release of the buckhounds, the Duke of Almada had stepped up to Mdme. de Locmaria.

"What is the matter with you, dear child?" he asked in an affectionate tone:—"You appear to be in pain. Are you unwell?"

"It is nothing. But do not busy yourself about me, as it is but a passing indisposition."

"Then you must take some stimulant so that you may not mar the sport."

He made a sign to a butler.

"Will you not drink to the good health and speedy return of our friend Joel?"

"With all my heart, my lord."

Thus she had accepted the drugged wine which he offered her. A few hours afterwards, the storm burst and the frightened queen ordered her ladies to return in all haste to St. Germain.

Aurore endeavoured to keep up with the riders, but a sudden weakness overcame her. She had not strength to guide her horse or to stop him. Her cry for help

died in her throat. She wrestled with serious depression. She was falling out of the saddle when Boislaurier ran up from the distance where he was watching her, and, with the help of two valets, caught her in his arms.

Now she reposed in a huge bed, with a plumed dome, heavy blue velvet curtains, with clasps and tassels of bullion, while a gilded rail separated it from the rest of the room. It was lighted by a silver lamp on a table, by which the Duke of Almada sat. At length he arose and taking the lamp, went up to view her.

"A beautiful statue in rose marble," he muttered. He returned to his seat. "In an hour the operation of my narcotic will be exhausted. On my faith, the king is a long time coming. Will he never have done with that supper? It appears that Joel is still alive and has written to his wife. It is certain that he worships her and it is no less certain that my future favourite would shed her last drop of blood for him. This does not displease me, for by threatening to reveal her shame to her husband——"

He interrupted himself as though to reply to the objection of an invisible objector:

"Even supposing this is vile and odious! Against the indignity of the act and the scoundrelism in its execution, would revolt the lofty gentlemanliness of Athos, the simple honesty of Porthos and D'Artagnan's valiant uprightness. D'Artagnan would swear with all the oaths in his Gascon vocabulary that what I do is of the meanest rascality. With the curl of his disdainful lip, Athos would let the one word fall: 'Fie!' The good Porthos would say nothing, but his frank visage would broaden with amaze to see his comrade of the Bastion St. Gervais and the Locmaria sea-cave—Aramis the musketeer, the prelate and the conspirator; the man who has juggled with the crown and sceptre of France and with royal persons and destinies—acting the spider—the panderer——"

His features which had remained handsome and noble in spite of age and intrigue ravaging them, became contracted. He took a crystal phial from his breast, hidden at the end of a gold chain amid the lace, and sipped a drop. His eye was brighter and his voice refreshed as he proceeded:

"Everything is ready. This woman must become the royal love so that, as her master, I may put into Louis's hand the pen that will strike out Heresy on the book of the Rights of Man. Then with the order of which I am the head remaining erect over its prostrated foes, my numerous, invincible, disciplined army, and when I command from the chair of St. Peter——"

Again he was hoarse, and he had recourse to the phial.

"Why not? are not my shoulders strong enough to support the pontifical purple? would not the tiara become my silver hairs, and is there not in me the making of a Gregory, a Leo, or a Julius? The end justifies the means. What does the mud in the road or the twig snapped under the foot matter to him who has reached the summit. What value is the virtue of one woman, the happiness of one man, when their loss ensures the triumph of religion? Well, no! all this is a fallacy with which I vainly try to lull my conscience. Religion is not in this game—I am playing it for my ambition solely." He laughed more like one of the drolls of Italian comedy than the great pontiffs whom he had mentioned. "But who cares? Has not the Holy Father power to absolve all crimes? when I am Pope, I shall cleanse myself."

He had hardly expressed this ironical jest when a violent surprise was manifested upon his features.

"What is that?" he muttered, half-rising, and looking towards the door.

"Surely I cannot be mistaken," he said with growing astonishment. "Some one is in the passage below." He rose fully. "Tush! no doubt it is Boislaurier—who

else could it be: but what can he want? What can have happened so important that he comes after me?"

He approached the door so artfully secreted in the woodwork that the most expert eye could not have found it. He touched a brass knob concealed among the ornaments with the same care. A spring worked, the panel opened, and, master of himself as was Aramis, he could not help exclaiming in affright.

In the square opening, pale, solemn and threatening, appeared with a drawn sword, smeared with fresh blood, the Son of Porthos!

Aramis receded to the table. This apparition was the one he least expected: it scattered his plans like the bombs Friquet's gunners had flung into Freiburg. But the former musketeer was not to be discomfited so easily. Had a bombshell really fallen at his feet, he would have plucked out the lighted fuse. His first feeling was of surprise, but it lasted only a moment, and this redoubtable wrestler quickly recalled his wits and collected his powers.

"Chevalier, how came you here? you have a post in the army—desertion is a grave offence."

"Sir," replied the Breton with terrible calm, "I have nothing to do with the army—Freiburg is taken—by me! I bring Marshal Créquy's report attesting that, in my pocket. But that is not our business. You want to know how it is that I come upon you by the secret stair? I have no time to go into particulars. Suffice it that Boislaurier is dead—so is your chief of cut-throats, Condor Cordbuff—executions which I will account for to those who have the right to question me. Now it is for us to settle accounts."

The ambassador remained cool, like the wild beast in his lair, who watches with apparently indifferent eye the movements of the hunter.

"Ha!" he haughtily said. "Have we an account to settle? I leave such matters to my servants. This

is neither the time nor place for such things. This is the king's home? Do you not know that?"

"To be sure I do, since I come here to recover my wife."

"Your wife?"

Joel stretched out his unweaponed hand.

"My wife who lies there, on the couch of which you have not even drawn the curtains, so surely did my visit deprive you of that precaution. You put her to sleep with a potion—so that she should not know of what crime you would be guilty—a potion such as you finger there——"

Aramis so felt the necessity of strengthening his nerves that he had indeed drawn his phial from its hiding-place.

"Mdme. de Locmaria is dead," said the old man dryly.

The other laughed menacingly.

"If I believed that, you would already be keeping your myrmidons company. But your greed is my insurance—the king will not pay you for a dead body."

"What, do you know?" said Aramis.

"I know that you found me that wife in order that I should be the mate of the king's favourite! that you sent me to Freiburg in the hope that I should never return—that the German bullets were hoped to do the work in which your secretaries failed——"

"Young man," returned the ambassador, shaking his bold head, "if you knew so much, you should have had the wit to be silent. Do you think that I am going lightly to renounce the prospective gains of what you term my infamy? let us share, or I take all! Come, my boy," went on the prelate, assuming the most unctuously paternal tone, "reflect that the highest state reasons constrain me to play this part: the sacrifice I require is necessary to political combinations which concern the peace of the world. You are a lad of

intelligence, who must understand and without plain speech: sheath your rapier, cease to roll your furious eyes, and get you gone——”

“ I go with my wife.”

“ Oh!” snarled the duke, his eye blazing from the effects of the cordial which he had sipped. “ You are trying my patience. Yet I do not wish you harm. Away—or I shall kill you.”

“ Whom have you to help you, old man? You forget that I have cleared the earth of your scoundrels. You are nearer the grave than I.”

Aurore made a movement, and Joel took a step towards her. But Aramis, who had drawn his court-sword, sprang in between with the factitious activity of the elixir:

“ With that toothpick do you talk of killing me?”

“ Defend her, and yourself!”

Joel thought that he might soon dispose of an adversary of this age, and he did not lose time in “ trying ” him, but almost at once delivered a straight thrust, rapid and flashing as a lightning stroke. The lunge was parried with a strength, ease and agility the Breton had not expected to meet in that frail body. So were met the others he gave, and however fleetly his long blade described circles, the thin blade followed it closely as the magnet the iron, twisting and hissing like a viper. The young man comprehended that he was pitted against no ordinary fencer, but against one of the first class, and that caused him to moderate his mode. Aramis plied the steel with a vivacity akin to that he must have displayed in his youth. It was in vain that the soldier multiplied his attacks: he found no weariness in this antagonist. His wrist seemed of steel while the other, fatigued by his long rides, his fall, the events of the day and his conflict in the subterranean passage with the duke's bravoës, became daunted by his inferiority. The blood

flew to his head, and his arm lost its usual vigour and liveliness.

At this moment, Aurore gave a sigh. The Breton heard it and it was the signal for a truce. Joel looked at his wife, while the old duke again sipped at the phial, doubling the dose. When he resumed the action, it was he who attacked, and with a fire which astounded his adversary.

"You are caught, my young fighting-cock," said he, with a sinister smile, "and I shall serve you out with the favourite thrust of my friend Porthos——"

By a strange coincidence, the same way of ending the conflict had occurred to both swordsmen. As a consequence, the swords glided along one another to the hilts, where the lightest blade snapped off short. But the defenceless state of Aramis was of no importance at this juncture, for the name had caused Joel to utter an exclamation:

"Porthos—he was my father!"

"Your father? Then I was his friend—I am Aramis!"

The old man recoiled and flung down the stump of his sword. Before him he thought he saw, as the false light and warmth of the elixir faded away, the phantom of the friend of his youth—the Porthos with simple grandeur of soul, and real superiority of heart—more mighty than splendour of mind. Sublime in vigour, courage and disinterestedness—smiling, open, unconquerable—the strongest of the Four Companions, and yet the first to die; to die, because he, the Chevalier d'Herblay, had drawn him innocently and unwittingly, into the tragical adventure of the Château of Vaux.

At last, his gigantic shade had come out of the tomb, and with it was ranged the spirits of Athos and D'Artagnan. They seemed to adopt their old friend's son, and stood ready to defend him. But there was no cause for them to stand between. After the flame which had coursed through the old man's veins and

made him lose the weight of eighty years, a sensation of coldness had crept over him. But in an instant, wherever the dangerous liquid had mingled with the blood, all the channels ached and seemed to be consumed.

"I am deceived," he muttered, staggering to the nearest chair and leaving the way clear to Joel who bounded over the rail to his wife's side. "The liquor of long life is ephemeral and I have but taken a lease of my life. Oh, I so wished to live—to reign—to have all the world for one, and that one—I——"

When Joel, carrying his wife in his arms with her heart again beating in unison with his own, passed the old man, he saw but a bent, gathered-up form in the chair. Aramis had died, without consciousness that *he* was, an accomplished courtier, committing the unpardonable sin of thrusting death before the eyes of a king.

CHAPTER XXXI

AU REVOIR

ON board of a sailing vessel crossing from Croisic to Belle-Isle, about a fortnight after, some of our characters could have been seen once more.

With an emotion which thrilled every fibre, our hero saw the sombre girdle of rocks rise on the sea-line where he had passed his young days. His youthful wife, lovelier than ever, leaned against him and watched him smile again as he heard the grumblings of Friquet to Sergeant Bonlarron.

"Our prince is a curmudgeon: not a bit of ribbon, medal or gold lace—not a coin with which to drink his health. Death of my life! what a joke it is to call him Louis the Great who is anything but tall."

The sunbeams gilded the boat as it ran into the port

of Locmaria under full sail. A cannon-shot from the fort saluted the arrival. Instantly the drums beat in the castle, and the bells were set ringing. When they disembarked, they found the garrison ranged in battle array on the strand; the soldiers had bunches of flowers in their muskets, and streamers of ribbons to their halberds. Behind them were all the inhabitants in their best clothes, the women and children carrying flowers. The men waved hats and caps, and all shouted:

"Long live the count! long live my lady! long live our new lord!"

"What a deucedly civilised country," said Friquet, "just look, sergeant, how the pretty girls perk up as we come along."

An officer came up hat in hand.

"May I ask for M. Joel of Locmaria?"

"Here am I," responded our hero, with the same civility.

Drawing his sword, the officer made a sign with it, on which the drums beat, the soldiers presented arms and the principal inhabitants advanced with bows.

"Welcome to the Count of Locmaria, Governor and Lord of the Manor of Locmaria!" was the universal shout.

There was news for Friquet at the Town Hall to which the new-comers were escorted. He was appointed commander of a small fleet which was to be sent to ruin Algiers; Bonlarron was appointed lieutenant in the same expedition.

Amongst the other documents, confirming the favours of the generous king—not to call his act of reparation—was a letter from Widow Scarron. It announced that she had been the bearer of the order to the Marchioness de Montespan that she must confine herself to a nunnery. Her place was taken by the governess, to whom Louis gave a large sum to buy the marquise of Maintenon, and support her in that title.

"I shall go soon to take command of my fleet."

said the little Parisan, an inch taller as the admiral of the bombardiers' navy.

"And I will accompany you," said Bonlarron, who had renewed his liking for the soldier's life.

"I shall stay where I am," said Joel, turning towards his wife, "beside my father's grave——"

"And the home of our children," added Aurore, looking up in his face.